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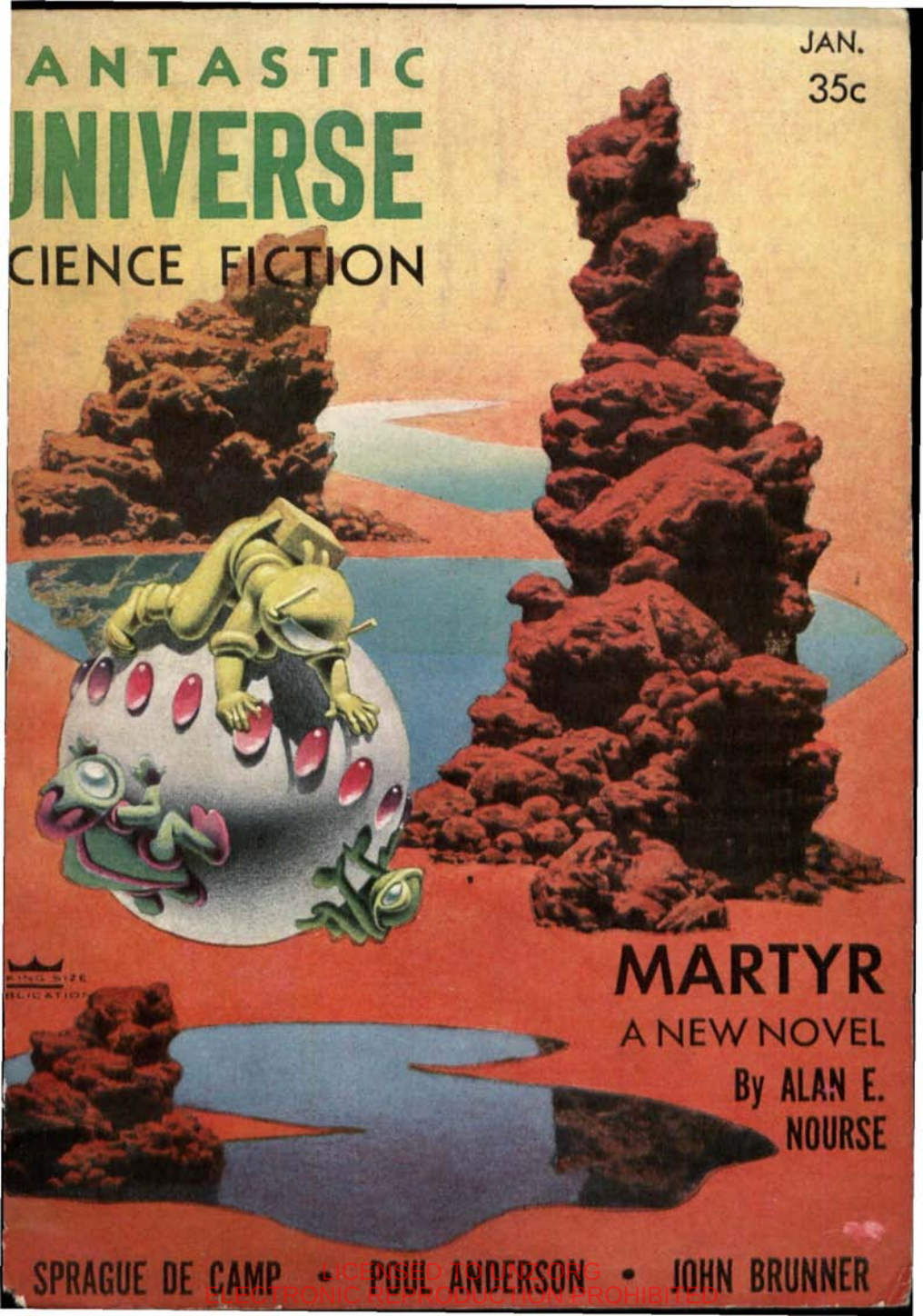

MARTYR

A NEW NOVEL

By ALAN E. NOURSE

SPRAGUE DE CAMP • POUL ANDERSON • JOHN BRUNNER

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THE STORY BEHIND THE COVER

Contrary to mid-twentieth century mythology, Venus, as previously mentioned in this magazine, is by no means the world of eternal mist and steaming jungles that the alleged authorities of those days contended was "the truth about the mystery planet".

There *is* no mystery about Venus. Well—almost no mystery . . . .

A good deal of Venus is desert—endless deserts that stretch as far as the eye can see—occasional mining settlements the only things to stand out against the strange Venusian sky. The sand lillies, sacred in the eyes of my friends the native Venusians but, I am afraid, not always appreciated by the miners since they grow to maturity with such astonishing speed, are found in the sometimes miles-long sand-valleys dotting the otherwise monotonous desert. In fact, it is true that you sometimes have to turn aside for miles, Venusian miles of course, before being able to continue your journey across the desert. These *zips*, as the miners call them (I hesitate to quote these men in full) can be extremely annoying, and are almost impossible to drive through when in season.

In the Spring, in the foothills of the Southern mountains, where desert and hills wage a continuous war for supremacy, you do find occasional little lakes of brackish Venus water, not recommended for human consumption in view of its high althium content, and strange rock formations, pushing their way out of the sand with almost Martian violence.

I was on my way to the hills last Spring when I stumbled on the enchanting scene our artist has drawn for you so much more effectively than I could ever attempt. I was astonished to find young Hannibal O'Leary, who should have been in school in Venusport that very moment, playing with two young *Glakka* friends, all of them (Hannibal in space suit for some strange reason) clinging to the boy's new-style runabout.

I suppose I should have lectured the youngster, but I could understand so well his feeling that this was much more fun than sitting behind a desk in the air-tempered school in town. Besides, in playing with these young *Glakka* children, descendants of what is said to be the oldest race on Venus, young Hannibal was of course studying group relations, in a manner of speaking.....

VITHALDAS O'QUINN
Lecturer in Venusian Antiquities
University of Ingenting, Venusport

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JANUARY, 1957

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Hannes Bok
Cover Design

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE, Vol. 7, No. 1. Published monthly by King-Size Publications, Inc., 320 Fifth Ave., N. Y. 1, N. Y. Subscription, 12 issues $3.75, single copies 35c. Foreign postage extra. Reentered as second-class matter at the post office, New York, N. Y. Additional entry, Holyoke, Mass. The characters in this magazine are entirely fictitious and have no relation to any persons living or dead. Copyright, 1956, by King-Size Publications, Inc. All rights reserved. January, 1957. Printed in U.S.A.

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Paul Harvey Hails New Way For Deaf To Hear Clearly Again

NEW YORK CITY (Special)—A sensational new discovery in the miracle science of electronics that helps the hard-of-hearing hear clearly again was hailed by Paul Harvey, famous news commentator, on his American Broadcasting Co. broadcast Sunday night.

Harvey revealed that this new discovery helps even those suffering a severe hearing loss to hear again with unbelievable clearness. It is so revolutionary it makes vacuum-tube hearing aids obsolete. Nothing shows in the ear except a tiny, almost invisible device.

"This new invention changes the lives of the hard-of-hearing overnight," Harvey said. "I've seen it happen to someone I know intimately."

Harvey urged his listeners to find out how this amazing discovery can bring new happiness and success to their loved ones who need better hearing.

To acquaint readers of this magazine with this new way to hear clearly again, a fascinating book with complete facts will be sent free, in a plain wrapper. No cost or obligation. Send your request on a postcard to Electronic Research Director, Dept. LH-2, Beltone Hearing Aid Co. 31 West 47 Street, New York 36, New York.

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martyr

by . . . ALAN E. NOURSE

"I can break him, split his Criterion Committee wide open *now* while there's still a chance, and open rejuvenation up to everybody....."

FOUR and one half hours after Martian sunset, the last light in the Headquarters Building finally blinked out.

Carl Golden stamped his feet nervously against the cold, cupping his cigarette in his hand to suck up the tiny spark of warmth. The night air bit his nostrils and made the smoke tasteless in the darkness. Atmosphere screens kept the oxygen in, all right—but they never kept the biting cold out. As the light disappeared he dropped the cigarette, stamping it sharply into darkness. Boredom vanished, and warm blood prickled through his shivering legs.

He slid back tight against the coarse black building front, peering across the road in the gloom.

It was the girl. He had thought so, but hadn't been sure. She swung the heavy stone door shut after her, glanced both left and right, and started down the frosty road toward the lights of the colony.

Carl Golden waited until she was gone. He glanced at

Rejuvenation for the millions—or rejuvenation for the five hundred lucky ones, the select ones, that can be treated each year? Tough, independent Senator Dan Fowler fights a one-man battle against the clique that seeks perpetual power and perpetual youth, in this hard-hitting novel by Alan E. Nourse. Why did it have to be his *personal fight? The others would fumble it—they'd foul it up, Fowler protested? But why* was *he in the fight and what was to happen to Senator Fowler's fight against this fantastic conspiracy? Who would win?*

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his wrist-chrono, and waited ten minutes more. He didn't realize that he was trembling until he ducked swiftly across the road. Through the window of the low, one-story building he could see the lobby call-board, with the little colored studs all dark. He smiled in unpleasant satisfaction—no one was left in the building. It was routine, just like everything else in this god-forsaken hole. Utter, abysmal, trancelike routine. The girl was a little later than usual, probably because of the ship coming in tomorrow. Reports to get ready, supply requisitions, personell recommendations—

—and the final reports on Armstrong's death. Mustn't forget that. The *real* story, the absolute, factual truth, without any nonsense. The reports that would go, ultimately, to Rinehart and only Rinehart, as all other important reports from the Mars Colony had been doing for so many years.

Carl skirted the long, low building, falling into the black shadows of the side wall. Halfway around he came to the supply chute, covered with a heavy moulded-stone cover.

Now?

It had taken four months here to know that he would have to do it this way. Four months of ridiculous masquerade—made idiotic by the incredible fact that everyone took him for exactly what he pretended to be, and never challenged him—not even Terry Fisher, who drunk or sober always challenged everything and everybody! But the four months had told on his nerves, in his reactions, in the hollows under his quick brown eyes. There was always the spectre of a slip-up, an aroused suspicion. And until he had the reports before his eyes, he couldn't fall back on Dan Fowler's name to save him. He had shook Dan's hand the night he had left, and Dan had said, "Remember, son—I don't know you. Hate to do it this way, but we can't risk it now—" And they couldn't, of course. Not until they knew, for certain, who had murdered Kenneth Armstrong.

They already knew why.

THE utter stillness of the place reassured him; he hoisted up the chute cover, threw it high, and shinned his long body into the chute. It was a steep slide; he held on for an instant, then let go. Blackness gulped him down as the cover snapped closed behind him.

He struck hard and rolled. The chute opened into the commissary in the third deep-level of the building, and the place was black as the inside of a pocket. He tested unbroken legs with a sigh of relief, and limped across to where the door should be.

In the corridor there was some light—dim phosphorescence from the Martian night-

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rock lining the walls and tiling the floor. He walked swiftly, cursing the clack-clack his heels made on the ringing stone. When he reached the end of the corridor he tried the heavy door.

It gave, complaining. Good, good! It had been a quick, imperfect job of jimmying the lock, so obviously poor that it had worried him a lot—but why should they test it? There was still another door.

He stepped into the blackness again, started across the room as the door swung shut behind him.

A shoe scraped, the faintest rustle of sound. Carl froze. His own trouser leg? A trick of acoustics? He didn't move a muscle.

Then: "Carl?"

His pocket light flickered around the room, a small secretary's ante-room. It stopped on a pair of legs, a body, slouched down in the soft plastifoam chair—a face, ruddy and bland, with a shock of sandy hair, with quixotic eyebrows. "Terry! For Christ sake, what—"

The man leaned forward, grinning up at him. "You're late, Carl." His voice was a muddy drawl. "Should have made it sooner than this, sheems—seems to me."

Carl's light moved past the man in the chair to the floor. The bottle was standing there, still half full. "My god, you're *drunk!*"

"Course I'm drunk. Whadjya think, I'd sober up after you left me tonight? No thanks, I'd rather be drunk." Terry Fisher hiccupped loudly. "I'd always rather be drunk, around this place."

"All right, you've got to get out of here—" Carl's voice rose with bitter anger. Of all times, of *all* times—he wanted to scream. "How did you get in here? You've *got* to get out—"

"So do you. They're on to you, Carl. I don't think you know that, but they are." He leaned forward precariously. "I had a talk with Barness this morning, one of his nice 'spontaneous' chats, and he pumped the hell out of me and thought I was too drunk to know it. They're expecting you to come here tonight—"

Carl heaved at the drunken man's arm, frantically in the darkness. "Get *out* of here, Terry, or so help me—"

Terry clutched at him. "Didn't you hear me? They *know* about you. Personell supervisor! They think you're spying for the Eastern boys—they're starting a Mars colony too, you know. Barness is sure you're selling them info—" The man hiccupped again. "Barness is an ass, just like all the other Retreads running this place, but I'm not an ass, and you didn't fool me for two days—"

Carl gritted his teeth. How could Terry Fisher know? "For the last time—"

Fisher lurched to his feet. "They'll get you, Carl. They

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can try you and shoot you right on the spot, and Barness will do it. I had to tell you, you've walked right into it, but you might still get away if—"

IT was cruel. The drunken man's head jerked up at the blow, and he gave a little grunt, then slid back down on the chair. Carl stepped over his legs, worked swiftly at the door beyond. If they caught him now, Terry Fisher was right. But in five more minutes—

The lock squeaked, and the door fell open. Inside he tore through the file cases, wrenched at the locked drawer in frantic haste, ripping the weak aluminum sheeting like thick tinfoil. Then he found the folder marked KENNETH ARMSTRONG on the tab.

Somewhere above him an alarm went off, screaming a mournful note through the building. He threw on the light switch, flooding the room with whiteness, and started through the papers, one by one, in the folder. No time to read. Flash retinal photos were hard to superimpose and keep straight. but that was one reason why Carl Golden was on Mars instead of sitting in an office back on Earth—

He flipped the last page, and threw the folder onto the floor. As he went through the door, he flipped out the light, raced with clattering footsteps down the corridor.

Lights caught him from both sides, slicing the blackness like hot knives. *"All right, Golden. Stop right there."*

Dark figures came out of the lights, ripped his clothing off without a word. Somebody wrenched open his mouth, shined a light in, rammed coarse cold fingers down into his throat. Then: "All right, you bastard, up stairs. Barness wants to see you."

They packed him naked into the street, hurried him into a three-wheeled ground car. Five minutes later he was wading through frosty dust into another building, and Barness was glaring at him across the room.

Odd things flashed through Carl's mind. You seldom saw a Repeater get really angry—but Barness was angry. The man's young-old face (the strange, utterly ageless amalgamation of sixty years of wisdom, superimposed by the youth of a twenty-year-old) had unaccustomed lines of wrath about the eyes and mouth. Barness didn't waste words. "What did you want down there?"

"Armstrong." Carl cut the word out almost gleefully. "And I got it, and there's nothing you or Rinehart or anybody else in between can do about it. I don't know *what* I saw yet, but I've got it in my eyes and in my cortex, and you can't touch it."

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"You stupid fool, we can *peel* your cortex," Barness snarled.

"Well, you won't. You won't dare."

Barness glanced across at the officer who had brought him in. "Tommy—"

"Dan Fowler won't like it," said Carl.

Barness stopped short, blinking. He took a slow breath. Then he sank down into his chair. "Fowler," he said, as though dawn were just breaking.

"That's right. He sent me up here. I've found what he wants. Shoot me now, and when they probe you Dan will know I found it, and you won't be around for another rejuvenation."

Barness looked suddenly old. "What did he want?"

"The truth about Armstrong. Not the 'accident' story you fed to the teevies ..."*Tragic End for World Hero, Died With His Boots On*". Dan wanted the truth. Who killed him. Why this colony is grinding down from compound low to stop, and turning men like Terry Fisher into alcoholic bums. Why this colony is turning into a glorified, super-refined Birdie's Rest for old men. But mostly who killed Armstrong, how he was murdered, who gave the orders. And if you don't mind, I'm beginning to get cold."

"And you got all that," said Barness.

"That's right."

"You haven't read it, though."

"Not yet. Plenty of time for that on the way back."

Barness nodded wearily, and motioned the guard to give Carl his clothes. "I think you'd better read it tonight. Maybe it'll surprise you."

Golden's eyes widened. Something in the man's voice, some curious note of defeat and hopelessness, told him that Barness was not lying. "Oh?"

"Armstrong didn't have an accident, that's true. But nobody murdered him, either. Nobody gave any orders, to anybody, from anybody. Armstrong put a bullet through his head—quite of his own volition."

II

"ALL right, Senator," the young red-headed doctor said. "You say you want it straight—that's how you're going to get it." Moments before, Dr. Moss had been laughing. Now he wasn't laughing. "Six months, at the outside. Nine, if you went to bed tomorrow, retired from the Senate, and lived on tea and crackers. But where I'm sitting I wouldn't bet a plugged nickle that you'll be alive a month from now. If you think I'm joking, you just try to squeeze a bet out of me."

Senator Dan Fowler took the black cigar from his

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mouth, stared at the chewed-up end for a moment, and put it back in again. He had had something exceedingly witty all ready to say at this point in the examination; now it didn't seem to be too funny. If Moss had been a mealy-mouthed quack like the last Doc he had seen, okay. But Moss wasn't. Moss was obviously not impressed by the old man sitting across the desk from him, a fact which made Dan Fowler just a trifle uneasy. And Moss knew his turnips.

Dan Fowler looked at the doctor and said, "Garbage."

The red-headed doctor shrugged. "Look, Senator—sometimes a banana is a banana. I know heart disease, and I know how it acts. I know that it kills people if they wait too long. And when you're dead, no rejuvenation lab is going to bring you back to life again."

"Oh, hell! Who's dying?" Fowler's grey eyebrows knit in the old familiar scowl, and he bit down hard on the cigar. "Heart disease! So I get a little pain now and then—sure it won't last forever, and when it gets bad I'll come in and take the full treatment. But I can't do it now!" He spread his hands in a violent gesture. "I only came in here because my daughter dragged me. My heart's doing fine—I've been working an eighteen hour day for forty years now, and I can do it for another year or two—"

"But you have pain," said Dr. Moss.

"So? A little twinge, now and then."

"Whenever you lose your temper. Whenever anything upsets you."

"All right—a twinge."

"Which makes you sit down for ten or fifteen minutes. Which doesn't go away with one nitro-tablet any more, so you have to take two, and sometimes three—right?"

DAN FOWLER blinked. "All right, sometimes it gets a little bad—"

"And it used to be only once or twice a month, but now it's almost every day. And once or twice you've blacked clean out for a while, and made your staff work like demons to cover for you and keep it off the teevies, right?"

"Say, who's been talking to you?"

"Jean has been talking to me."

"Can't even trust your own daughter to keep her trap shut." The Senator tossed the cigar butt down in disgust. "It happened once, yes. That god damned Rinehart is enough to make anybody black out." He thrust out his jaw and glowered at Dr. Moss as though it were all *his* fault. Then he grinned. "Oh, I know you're right, Doc. It's just that this is the wrong *time*. I can't take two months out now—there's too much to be done between now and the

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middle of next month."

"Oh, yes. The Hearings. Why not turn it over to your staff? They know what's going on."

"Nonsense. They know, but not like I know. After the Hearings, fine—I'll come along like a lamb. But now—"

Dr. Moss reddened, slammed his fist down on the desk. "Dammit, man, are you blind and deaf? Or just plain stupid? Didn't you hear me a moment ago? *You may not live through the Hearings.* You could *go*, just like that, any minute. But this is 2134 A.D., not the middle ages. It would be so utterly, hopelessly pointless to let that happen—"

Fowler champed his cigar and scowled. "After it was done I'd have to Free-Agent for a year, wouldn't I?" It was an accusation.

"You *should*. But that's a formality. If you want to go back to what you were doing the day you came from the Center—"

"Yes, *if!* But supposing I didn't? Supposing I was all changed?"

The young doctor looked at the old man shrewdly. Dan Fowler was 56 years old—and he looked forty. It seemed incredible even to Moss that the man could have done what he had done, and look almost as young and fighting-mad now as he had when he started. Clever old goat, too—but Dan Fowler's last remark opened the hidden door wide. Moss smiled to himself. "You're afraid of it, aren't you, Senator?"

"Of rejuvenation? Nonsense."

"But you are. You aren't the only one—it's a pretty frightening thing. Cash in the old model, take out a new one, just like a jet racer or a worn out talk-writer. Only it isn't machinery, it's your body, and your life." Dr. Moss grinned. "It scares a man. *Rejuvenation* isn't the right word, of course. Aside from the neurones, they take away every cell in your body, one way or another, and give you new ones. A hundred and fifty years ago Cancelmo and Klein did it on a dog, and called it *subtotal prosthesis.* A crude job—I've seen their papers and films. Vat-grown hearts and kidneys, revitalized vascular material, building up new organ systems like a patchwork quilt, coaxing new tissues to grow to replace old ones—but they got a living dog out of it, and that dog lived to the ripe old age of 37 years before he died."

MOSS pushed back from his desk, watching Dan Fowler's face. "Then in 1992 Nimrock tried it on a man, and almost got himself hanged because the man died. That was a hundred and forty-two years ago. And then while he was still on trial, his workers completed the second job, and the man *lived,* and oh,

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how the jig changed for Nimrock!"

The doctor shrugged. As he talked, Dan Fowler sat silent, chewing his cigar furiously. But listening—he was listening, all right. "Well, it was crude, then," Moss said. "It's not so crude any more." He pointed to a large bronze plaque hanging on the office wall. "You've seen that before. Read it."

Dan Fowler's eyes went up to the plaque. A list of names. At the top words said, *"These ten gave life to Mankind."*

Below it were the names:

Martin Aronson, Ph. D.
Education
Thomas Bevalaqua
Literature and Art
Chauncy Devlin
Music
Frederick A. Kehler, M. S.
Engineering
William B. Morse, L. L. D.
Law
Rev. Hugh H. F. Norton
Philosophy and Theology
Jacob Prowsnitz, Ph. D.
History
Arthur L. Rodgers, M. D.
Medicine
Carlotta Sokol, Ph. D.
Sociopsychology
Harvey Tatum
Business

"I know," said Dan Fowler. "June 1st, 2005. They were volunteers."

"Ten out of several dozen volunteers," Moss amended. "Those ten were chosen by lot. Already people were dreaming of what subtotal prosthesis could do. It could preserve the great minds, it could compound the accumulated wisdom of one lifetime with another lifetime—and maybe more. Those ten people—representing ten great fields of study— risked their lives. Not to live forever—just to see if rejuvenation could really preserve their minds in newly built bodies. All of them were old, older than you are, Senator, some were sicker than you, and all of them were afraid. But seven of the ten are *still alive today,* a hundred and thirty years later. Rodgers died in a jet crash. Tatum died of neuro-toxic virus, because we couldn't do anything to rebuild neurones in those days. Bevalaqua suicided. The rest are still alive, after two more rejuvenations."

"Fine," said Dan Fowler. "I still can't do it now."

"That was just ten people," Moss cut in. "It took five years to get ready for them. But now we can do five hundred a year—only five hundred select individuals, to live on instead of dying. And you've got the gall to sit there and tell me you don't have the time for it!"

THE old man rose slowly, lighting another cigar. "It could be five thousand a year. That's why I don't have the time. Fifteen thousand, fifty thousand. We could do

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it—but we're not doing it. Walter Rinehart's been rejuvenated—twice already! *I'm* on the list because I shouted so loud they didn't dare leave me off. But *you're* not on it. Why not? You could be. Everybody could be."

Dr. Moss spread his hands. "The Criterion Committee does the choosing."

"*Rinehart's* criteria! Only five hundred a year. Use it for a weapon. Build power with it. Get a strangle-hold on it, and never, never let it go." The Senator leaned across the desk, his eyes bright with anger. "I haven't got time to stop what I'm doing now—because I can *stop* Rinehart, if I only live that long, I can break him, split his Criterion Committee wide open *now* while there's still a chance, and open rejuvenation up to everybody instead of five hundred lucky ones a year. I can stop him because I've dug at him and dug at him for twenty-nine years, and shouted and screamed and fought and made people listen. And if I fumble now, it'll all be down the drain, finished, washed up.

"If that happens, *nobody* will ever stop him."

There was silence in the room for a moment. Then Moss spread his hands. "The hearings are that critical, eh?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Why has it got to be *your* personal fight? Other people could do it."

"They'd fumble it. They'd foul it up. Senator Libby fouled it up once already, a long time ago. Rinehart's lived for a hundred and nineteen years, and he's learning new tricks every year. I've only lived fifty-six of them, but I know his tricks. I can beat him."

"But why *you?*"

"Somebody's got to do it. My card is on top."

A 'phone buzzer chirped. "Yes, he's here." Dr. Moss handed Dan the receiver. A moment later the Senator was grinning like a cat struggling into his overcoat and scarf. "Sorry, Doc—I know what you tell me is true, and I'm no fool. If I have to stop, I'll stop."

"Tomorrow, then."

"Not tomorrow. One of my lads is back from the Mars Colony. Tomorrow we powwow—but hard. After the hearings, Doc. And meanwhile, keep your eye on the teevies. I'll be seeing you."

The door clicked shut with a note of finality, and Dr. David Moss stared at it gloomily. "I hope so," he said. But nobody in particular heard him.

III

A VOLTA two-wheeler was waiting for him outside. Jean drove off down the

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drive with characteristic contempt for the laws of gravity when Dan had piled in, and Carl Golden was there, looking thinner, more gaunt and hawk-like than ever before, his brown eyes sharp under his shock of black hair, his long, thin aquiline nose ("If you weren't a Jew you'd be a discredit to the Gentiles," Dan Fowler had twitted him once, years before, and Carl had looked down his long, thin, aquiline nose, and sniffed, and let the matter drop, because until then he had never been sure whether his being a Jew had mattered to Dan Fowler or not, and now he knew, and was quite satisfied with the knowledge) and the ever-present cigarette between thin, sensitive fingers. Dan clapped him on the shoulder, and shot a black look at his daughter, relegating her to an indescribable Fowler limbo, which was where she belonged, and would reside until Dan got excited and forgot how she'd betrayed him to Dr. Moss, which would take about ten or fifteen minutes all told. Jean Fowler knew her father far too well to worry about it, and squinted out the window at the afternoon traffic as the car skidded the corner into the Boulevard Throughway, across the river toward home. "God damn it, boy, you could have *wired* me at least. One of Jean's crew spotted the passage list, so I knew you'd left, and got the hearing moved up to next month—"

Carl scowled. "I thought it was all set for February 15th."

Dan chuckled. "It was. But I was only waiting for you, and got the ball rolling as soon as I knew you were on your way. Dwight McKenzie is still writing the Committee's business calendar, of course, and he didn't like it a bit, but he couldn't find any solid reason why it *shouldn't* be set ahead. And I think our good friend Senator Rinehart is probably wriggling on the stick about now, just on the shock value of the switch. Always figure in the shock value of everything you do, my boy—it pays off more than you'd ever dream—"

Carl Golden shook his head. "I don't like it, Dan."

"What, the switch in dates?"

"The switch. I wish you hadn't done that."

"But why? Look, son, I know that with Ken Armstrong dead our whole approach has to be changed—it's going to be trickier, but it might even work out better. The Senate knows what's been going on between Rinehart and me, and so does the President. They know elections are due next June. They know I want a seat on his

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Criterion Committee before elections, and they know that to get on it I'll do my damnedest to unseat him. They know I've shaken him up, that he's scared of me. Okay, fine. With Armstrong there to tell how he was chosen for Retread back in '87, we'd have had Rinehart running for his life..."

"But you don't," Carl cut in flatly, "and that's that."

"What, are you crazy, son? *I needed Armstrong, bad.* Rinehart knew it, and had him taken care of. It was fishy—it stunk from here to Mars, but Rinehart covered it up fast and clean. But with the stuff you got up in the Colony, we can charge Rinehart with murder, and the whole Senate knows his motive already. He didn't *dare* to let Armstrong testify."

CARL was shaking his head sadly.

"Well, what's wrong?"

"You aren't going to like this, Dan. Rinehart's clean. Armstrong comitted suicide."

Fowler's mouth fell open, and he sat back hard. "Oh, no."

"Sorry."

"Ken Armstrong? Suicided?" He shook his head helplessly, groping for words. "I—I—oh, Jesus. I don't believe it. If Ken Armstrong suicided, I'm the Scarlet Whore of Babylon."

"Well, we'll try to keep *that* off the teevies."

"There's no chance that you're wrong," said the old man.

Carl shook his head. "There's plenty that's funny about that Mars Colony, but Armstrong's death was suicide. Period. Even Barness didn't understand it."

Sharp eyes went to Carl's face. "What's funny about the Colony?"

Carl shrugged, and lit a cigarette. "Hard to say. This was my first look, I had nothing to compare it with. But there's *something* wrong. I always thought the Mars Colony was a frontier, a real challenge—you know, Man against the Wilderness, and all that. Saloons jammed on Saturday nights with rough boys out to get some and babes that had it to give. A place that could take Earth-bound softies and toughen them up in a week, working to tame down the desert—"

His voice trailed off. "They've got a saloon, all right—but everybody just comes in quietly and gets slobbery drunk. Met a guy named Fisher, thought the same thing I did when he came up five years ago. A real go-getter, leader type, lots of ideas and the guts to put them across. Now he's got a hob-nail liver and he came back here on the ship with me, hating Mars and everything up there, most of

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all himself. Something's wrong up there, Dan. Maybe that's why Armstrong bowed out."

The Senator took a deep breath. "Not a man like Ken Armstrong. Why, I used to worship him when I was a kid. I was ten when he came back to Earth for his second Retread." The old man shook his head. "I wanted to go back to Mars with him—I actually packed up to run away, until dear brother Paul caught me and squealed to Dad. Imagine."

"I'm sorry, Dan."

The car whizzed off the Throughway, and began weaving through the residential areas of Arlington. Jean swung under an arched gate, stopped in front of a large greystone house of the sort they hadn't built for a hundred years. Dan Fowler stared out at the grey November afternoon. "Well, then we're really on thin ice at the Hearings. We can still do it. It'll take some steamrollering, but we can manage it." He turned to the girl. "Get Schirmer on the wire as soon as we get inside. I'll go over Carl's report for whatever I can find. Tell Schirmer if he wants to keep his job as Coordinator of the Medical Center next year, he'd better have all the statistics available on all rejuvenated persons, past and present, in my office tomorrow morning."

Jean gave her father a queer look. "Schirmer's waiting for you inside right now."

"Oh? Why?"

"He wouldn't say. Nothing to do with politics, he said. Something about Paul."

NATHAN SHIRMER was waiting in the library, sipping a brandy and pretending to scan a Congressional Record in the viewer-box. He looked up, bird-like, as Dan Fowler strode in. "Well, Nate. Sit down, sit down. I see you're into my private stock already, so I won't offer you any. What's this about my brother?"

Schirmer coughed into his hand. "Why—Dan, I don't quite know how to tell you this. He was in Washington this afternoon—"

"Of course he was. He was supposed to go to the Center—" Dan broke off short, whirling on Schirmer. "Wait a minute! There wasn't a slip-up on this permit?"

"Permit?"

"For rejuvention, you ass! He's on the Starship Project, coordinating engineer of the whole works out there. He's got a fair place on the list coming to him three ways from Sunday. Follmer put the permit through months ago, and Paul has just been diddling around getting himself clear so he could come in—"

The little Coordinator's

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eyes widened. "Oh, there wasn't anything wrong on *our* side, if that's what you mean. The permit was perfectly clear, the doctors were waiting for him. It was nothing like that."

"Then what was it like?"

Nathan Schirmer wriggled. and tried to avoid Dan's eyes. "Your brother refused it. He laughed in our faces, and told us to go to hell, and took the next jet back to Nevada. All in one afternoon."

The vibration of the jet engines hung just at perception level, nagging and nagging at Dan Fowler, until he threw his papers aside with a snarl of disgust, and peered angrily out the window.

They were high, and moving fast. Far below was a tiny spot of light in the blackness. Pittsburgh. Maybe Cleveland. It didn't matter which. Jets traveled at such-and-such a rate of speed; they left at such-and-such a time and arrived elsewhere at such-and-such a time later. He could worry, or he could not-worry. The jet would bring him down in Las Vegas in exactly the same time, to the second, either way. Another half-hour taxi ride over dusty desert roads would bring him to the glorified quonset hut his brother called home. Nothing Dan Fowler could do would hurry the process of getting there.

Dan had called, and received no answer.

He had talked to the Las Vegas authorities, and even gotten Lijinsky at the Starship, and neither of them knew anything. The police said yes, they would check at Dr. Fowler's residence, if he wasn't out at the Ship, and check back. But they hadn't checked back, and that was two hours ago. Meanwhile, Carl had chartered him a plane.

God damn Paul to three kinds of hell. Of all miserable times to start playing games, acting like an imbecile child! And the work and sweat Dan had gone through to get that permit, to buy it beg it, steal it, gold-plate it. Of course the odds were good that Paul would have gotten it without a whisper from Dan—he was high on the list, he was critical to Starship, and certainly Starship was critical enough to rate. But Dan had gone out on a limb, way out—The Senator's fist clenched, and he drummed it helplessly on the empty seat, and felt a twinge of pain spread up his chest, down his arm. He cursed. fumbled for the bottle in his vest pocket. God damned heart and god damned brother and god damned Rinehart —did *everything* have to split the wrong way? Now? Of all times of all days of all his fifty-six years of life, *now*?

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All right, Dan. Cool, boy. Relax. Shame on you. Can't you quit being selfish just for a little while? Dan didn't like the idea as it flickered through his mind, but then he didn't like anything too much right then, so he forced the thought back for a rerun.

Big Dan Fowler, *Senator* Dan Fowler, Selfish Dan Fowler loves Dan Fowler mostly.

Poor Paul.

THE words had been going through his mind like a silly chant since the first moment he had seen Nate Schirmer in the library. Poor Paul. Dan did all right for himself, he did—made quite a name down in Washington, you know, a fighter, a real fighter. The Boy with the Golden Touch (joke, son, laugh now). Everything he ever did worked out with him on top, somehow. Paul was different. Smart enough, plenty of the old gazoo, but he never had Dan's drive. Bad breaks, right down the line. Kinda tough on a guy, with a comet like Dan in family. Poor Paul.

He let his mind drift back slowly, remembering little things, trying to spot the time, the single instant in time, when he had stopped fighting Paul and started feeling sorry for him. It had been different, years ago. Paul was the smart one, all right. Never had Dan's build but he could think rings around him. Dan was always a little slow—never forgot anything he learned, but he learned slow. Still, there were ways to get around that—

Dad and Mom always liked Paul the best (their first boy, you know) and babied him more, and that was decidedly tougher to get around—Still there were ways.

Like the night the prize money came from the lottery, when he and Paul had split a ticket down the middle. How old was he then—ten? Eleven? And Paul was fifteen. He'd grubbed up the dollar polishing cars, and met Paul's dollar halfway, never dreaming the thing would pay off. And when it did! Oh, he'd never forget that night. He wanted the jet-racer. The ticket paid two thousand, a hell of a lot of cash for a pair of boys—and the two thousand would buy the racer. He'd been so excited tears had poured down his face...But Paul had said no. Split it even, just like the ticket, Paul had said. There were hot words, and pleading, and threats, and Paul had just laughed at him until he got so mad he wanted to kill him with only his fists. Bad mistake, that. Paul was skinny, not much muscle, read books all the time

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it looked like a cinch. But Paul had five years on him that he hadn't counted on. Important five years. Paul connected with just one—enough to lay Dan flat on his back with a concussion and a broken jaw, and that, my boy, was that.

Almost.

Dan had won the fight, of course. It was the broken jaw that did it. that night, later the fight Mom and Dad had, worse than usual, a cruel one, low blows, mean—But Dan got his racer, on the strength of the broken jaw. That jaw had done him a lot of good. Never grew quite right after that, got one of the centers of ossification, the doc had said, and Dan had been god's gift to the pen-and brush men with that heavy, angular jaw—a fighter's jaw, they called it.

THAT started it, of course. He knew then that he could beat Paul. Good to know. But never—*sure* of it, always having to prove it. The successes came, and always he let Paul know about them, watched Paul's face like a cat. And Paul would squirm, and sneer, and tell Dan that in the end it was brains that would pay off. Sour grapes, of course. If Paul had ever squared off to him again, man to man, they might have had it over with. But Paul just seemed content to sit and quietly hate him.

Like the night he broke the Universalists in New Chicago, at the hundred-dollar-a-plate dinner. He'd told them, that night. That was the night they'd cold-shouldered him, and put Libby up to run for Mayor. Oh, he'd raised a glorious stink that night—he'd never enjoyed himself so much in his life, turning their whole twisted machine right over to the public on a silver platter. Cutting loose from the old crowd, appointing himself a committee of one to nominate himself on an Independent Reform ticket, campaign himself, and elect himself. A whippersnapper of thirty-two. Paul had been amused by it all, almost indulgent. "You *do* get melodramatic, don't you, Dan? Well, if you want to cut your own throat, that's your affair." And Dan had b u r n e d, and told Paul to watch the teevies, he'd see a thing or two, and he did, all right. He remembered Paul's face a few months later, when Libby conceded at 11:45 PM on election night, and Dan rode into office with a new crowd of livewires who were ready to help him plow into New Chicago and clean up that burg like it'd never been cleaned up. And the sweetest part of the victory pie had been the look on Paul's face that night—

So they'd fought, and he'd won and rubbed it in, and

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Paul had lost, and hated him for it, until that mysterious day—when had it really happened?—when "that big-brained brother of mine" changed subtly into "Christ, man, quit floundering! Who wants engineers? They're all over the place, you'll starve to death" and then finally, to "poor Paul."

When had it happened? Why?

Dan wondered, suddenly, if he had ever really forgiven Paul that blow to the jaw—

Perhaps.

He shook himself, scowling into the plastiglass window blackness. Okay, they'd fought it out. Always jolly, always making it out to be a big friendly game, only it never was a game. He knew how much he owed to Paul. He'd known it with growing concern for a lot of years. And now if he had to drag him back to Washington by the hair, he'd drag the silly fool—

IV

THEY didn't look very much alike. There was a spareness about Paul—a tall, lean, hungry-looking man, with large soft eyes that hid their anger and a face that was lined with tiredness and resignation. A year ago, when Dan had seen him last, he had looked a young 60, closer to 45; now he looked an old, old 61. How much of this was the cancer Dan didn't know. The pathologist had said: "Not a very malignant tumor right now, but you can never tell when it'll blow up. He'd better be scheduled at the Center, if he's got a permit—"

But some of it was Paul, just Paul. The house was exactly as Dan had expected it would be (though he had never been inside this house since Paul had come to Starship Project fifteen years ago)—stuffy, severe, rather gloomy, rooms packed with bookshelves, drawing boards, odds and ends of papers and blue-prints and inks, thick, ugly furniture from the early 2000's, a cluttered, improvised, helter-skelter barn of a testing-lab, with modern equipment that looked lost and alien scattered among the mouldering junk of two centuries.

"Get your coat," said Dan. "It's cold outside. We're going back to Washington."

"Have a drink." Paul waved him toward the sideboard. "Relax. Your pilot needs a rest."

"Paul, I didn't come here to play games. The games are over now."

Paul poured a brandy with deliberation. Handed Dan one, sipped his own. "Good brandy," he murmured. "Wish I could afford more of it."

"*Paul.* You're going with me."

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The old man shrugged with a little tired smile. "I'll go with you if you insist, of course. But I'm not going."

"Do you know what you're saying?"

"Perfectly."

"Paul, you don't just say 'Thanks, but I don't believe I'll have any' when they give you a rejuvenation permit. *Nobody* refuses rejuvenation. Why, there are a million people out there begging for a place on the list. It's *life*, Paul. You can't just turn it down—"

"This *is* good brandy," said Paul. "Would you care to take a look at my lab, by the way? Not too well equipped, but sometimes I can work here better than—"

Dan swung on his brother viciously. "I will tell you what I'm going to do," he grated, hitting each word hard, like knuckles rapping the table. "I'm going to take you to the plane. If you won't come, my pilot and I will drag you. When we get to Washington, we'll take you to the Center. If you won't sign the necessary releases, I'll forge them. I'll bribe two witnesses who will swear in the face of death by torture that they saw you signing. I'll buy out the doctors that can do the job, and if they won't do it, I'll sweat them down until they *will*."

HE slammed the glass down on the table, feeling his heart pounding in his throat, feeling the pain creep up. "I've got lots of things on lots of people, and I can get things done when I want them done. People don't fool with me in Washington any more, because when they do they get their fingers burned off at the knuckles. For Christ sake, Paul, I knew you were stubborn but I didn't think you were block-headed stupid!"

Paul shrugged, apologetically. "I'm impressed, Dan. Really."

"You don't think I can do it?" Dan roared.

"Oh, no doubt you *could*. But such a lot of trouble for an unwilling victim. And I'm your brother, Dan. Remember?"

Dan Fowler spread his hands in defeat, then sank down in the chair. "Paul, tell me *why*."

"I don't want to be rejuvenated." As though he were saying, "I don't want any sugar in my coffee."

"Why not? If I could only see why, if I knew what was going through your mind, maybe I could understand. But I can't."

Dan looked up at Paul, practically pleading. "You're *needed*. I had a tape from Lijinsky last month—do you know what he said? He said why couldn't you have come to Starship ten years earlier? Nobody knows that ship like you do, you're making it go.

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That ship can take men to the stars, now, with rejuvenation, and the same men can come back again to find the same people waiting for them when they get here. They can *live* that long, now. We've been tied down to seventy years of life, to a tight little universe of one sun and nine planets for thousands of years. Well, we can change that now. We can go out. That's what your work can do for us." He stared helplessly at his brother. "You could go out on that ship you're building, Paul. You've always wanted to. *Why not?*"

Paul looked across at him for a long moment. There was pity in his eyes. There was also hatred there, and victory, long awaited, bitterly won. "Do you really want me to tell you?"

"I want you to tell me."

Then Paul told him. It took about ten minutes. It was not tempered with mercy.

It split Dan Fowler's world wide open at the seams.

"You've been talking about the Starship," said Paul Fowler. "All right, that's as good a starting place as any. I came to Starship Project—what was it, fifteen years ago? Almost sixteen, I guess. This was my meat. I couldn't work well with people, I worked with *things*, processes, ideas. I dug in hard on Starship. I loved it, dreamed it, lived with it. I had dreams in those days. Work hard, make myself valuable here, maybe I'd *get* rejuvenation, so I could work more on Starship. I believed everything you just said. Alpha Centauri, Arcturus, Vega, anywhere we wanted to go—and I could go along! It wouldn't be long, either. We had Lijinsky back with us after his rejuvenation, directing the Project, we had Keller and Stark and Eddie Cochran—great men, the men who had pounded Starship Project into reality, took it out of the story books and made the people of this country want it bad enough to pay for it. Those men were back now—new men, rebuilt bodies, with all their knowledge and experience preserved. Only now they had something even more precious than life: *time*. And I was part of it, and I too could have time."

Paul shook his head, slowly, and sank back into the chair. His eyes were very tired. "A dream, nothing more. A fantasy. It took me fifteen years to learn what a dream it was. Not even a suspicion at first—only a vague puzzlement, things happening that I couldn't quite grasp. Easy to shrug off, until it got too obvious. Not a matter of wrong decisions, really. The decisions were right, but they were in the wrong places. Something about Starship Project shift-

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ing, changing somehow. Something being lost. Slowly. Nothing you could nail down, at first, but growing month by month.

"Then one night I saw what it was. That was when I equipped the lab here, and proved to myself that Starship Project was a dream."

HE spread his hands and smiled at Dan like a benign old Chips to a third-form schoolboy. "The Starship isn't going to Alpha Centauri or anywhere else. It's not going to leave the ground. I thought I'd live long enough to launch that ship and be one of its crew. Well, I won't. That ship wouldn't leave the ground if I lived a million years."

"Garbage," said Dan Fowler succinctly.

"No, Dan. Not garbage. Unfortunately, we sometimes have to recognize our dreams as dreams, and look reality right square in the face. Starship Project is dying. Our whole civilization is dying. Nimrock drove the first nail into the coffin a hundred and thirty years ago—lord, if they'd only hanged him when his first rejuvenation failed! But that would only have delayed it. Now we're dying, slowly right now, but soon it will be fast, very fast. And do you know who's getting set to land the death-blow?" He smiled sadly across at his brother. "You are, Dan."

Dan Fowler sprang from his chair with a roar. "My god, Paul, you're *sick*! Of all the idiot's delight's I ever heard, I—I—oh, Jesus." He stood shaking, groping for words, staring at his brother.

"You said you wanted me to tell you."

"Tell me! Tell me what?" Dan took a trembling breath, and sat down, visibly gripping himself. "All right, all right, I heard what you said—you must mean something, but I don't know what. Let's be reasonable. Let's forget philosophy and semantics and concepts and all the frills for just a minute and talk about facts, huh? *Just facts.*"

"All right, facts," said Paul. "Kenneth Armstrong wrote MAN ON MARS in 2028—he was fifty-seven years old then, and he hadn't been rejuvenated yet. Fundamentally a good book, analyzing his first Mars Colony, taking it apart right down to the silk undies, to show why it had failed so miserably, and why the next one could succeed if he could ever get up there again. He had foresight; with rejuvenation just getting started, he had a whole flock of ideas about overpopulation and the need for a Mars Colony—he was all wet on the population angle, of course, but nobody knew that then. He kicked Keller and Lijinsky off on the Starship idea. They ad-

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mit it—it was MAN ON MARS that first started them thinking. They were both young, with lots of fight in them. Okay?"

"Just stick to facts," said Dan coldly.

"OKAY. Starship Project got started, and blossomed into the people's Baby. They started work on the basic blueprints about 60 years ago. Everybody knew it would be a long job—cost money, plenty of it, and there was so much to do before the building ever began. That was where I came in, fifteen years ago. Building. They were looking for engineers who weren't eager to get rich. It went fine. We started to build. Then Keller and Stark came back from rejuvenation. Lijinsky had been rejuvenated five years before."

"Look, I don't need a course in history," Dan exploded.

"Yes, you do," Paul snapped. "You need to sit down and listen for once, instead of shooting your big mouth off all the time. That's what you need real bad, Dan." Paul Fowler rubbed his chin. There were red spots in his cheeks. "Okay, there were some changes made. I didn't like the engine housing—I never had, so I went along with them a hundred percent on that. Even though I designed it—I'd learned a few things since. And there were bugs. It made perfectly good sense, talking to Lijinsky. Starship Project was pretty important to all of us. Dangerous to risk a fumble on the first play, even a tiny risk. We might never get another chance. Lijinsky knew we youngsters were driving along on adrenalin and nerves, and couldn't wait to get out there, but when you thought about it, what was the rush? Was it worth a chance of a fumble to get out there *this* year instead of *next?* Couldn't we take time to find a valid test for that engine at ultra-high acceleration before we put it back in? After all, we *had* time now—Keller and Stark just back with sixty more years to live—why the rush?

"Okay. I bought it. We worked out a valid test on paper. Took us four years of work on it to find out you couldn't build such a device on Earth, but never mind that. Other things were stalling all the while. The colony-plan for the ship. Choosing the crew—what criteria, what qualifications? There was plenty of time—why not make *sure* it's right? Don't leave anything crude, if we can refine it a little first—"

Paul sighed wearily. "It snowballed. Keller and Stark backed Lijinsky to the hilt. There was some trouble about money—I think you had your thumb in the pie there, getting it fixed for us,

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didn't you? More refining. Work it out. Detail. Get sidetracked on some aspect for a few years—so what? Lots of time. Rejuvenation, and all that, talk about the Universalists beating Rinehart out and throwing the Center open to everybody. Et cetera, et cetera. But somewhere along the line I began to see that it just wasn't true. The holdups, the changes, the digressions and snags and refinements were all excuses, all part of a big, beautiful, exquisitely reasonable facade built up to obscure the real truth. *Lijinsky and Keller and Stark had changed.*"

Dan Fowler snorted. "I know a very smart young doctor who told me that there *weren't* any changes."

"I don't mean anything physical—their bodies were fine. Nothing mental, either—they had the same sharp minds they always had. It was a change in values. They'd lost something that they'd had before. The *drive* that made them start Starship Project, the *urgency*, the vital importance of the thing—it was all gone. They just didn't have the push any more. They began to look for the easy way, and it was far easier to build and rebuild, and refine, and improve the Starship here on the ground than to throw that Starship out into space—"

THERE was a long, long silence. Dan Fowler sat grey-faced, staring at Paul, just shaking his head and staring. "I don't believe it," he said finally. "You do maybe, because you want to, but you're mixed up, Paul. I've seen Lijinsky's reports. There's been progress, regular progress, month by month. You've been too close to it, maybe. Of course there have been delays, but only when they were necessary. The progress has gone on—"

Paul stood up suddenly. "Come in here, Dan. Look." He threw open a door, strode rapidly down a corridor and a flight of stairs into the long, low barn of a laboratory. "Here, here, let me show you something." He pulled out drawers, dragged out rolls of blueprints. "These are my own. They're based on the working prints from Starship that we drew up ten years ago, scaled down to model size. I've tested them, I've run tolerances, I've checked the math five ways and back again. I've tested the parts, the engine—model size. The blueprints haven't got a flaw in them. They're perfect as they'll ever get. No, wait a minute, look—"

He strode fiercely across to slide back a floor panel, drew up the long, glittering thing from a well in the floor—sleek, beautiful, three

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feet long. Paul maneuvered a midget loading crane, guided the thing into launching position on the floor, then turned back to Dan. "There it is. Just a model, but it's perfect. Every detail is perfect. There's even fuel in it. No men, but there could be if there were any men small enough."

Anger was blazing in Paul's voice now, bitterness and frustration. "I built it, because I had to be sure. I've tested its thrust. I could launch this model for Alpha Centauri tonight—and *it would get there.* If there were little men who could get into it, *they'd* get there, too—alive. Starship Project is completed, it's been completed for ten years now, but do you know what happened to these blueprints, the originals? They were studied. They were improvements. They almost had the ship built, and then they took it apart again."

"But I've read the reports," Dan cried.

"Have you *seen* the Starship? Have you *talked* to them over there? It isn't just there, it's *everywhere,* Dan. There are only about 70,000 rejuvenated men alive in this hemisphere so far, but already the change is beginning to show. Go talk to the Advertising people—*there's* a delicate indicator of social change if there ever was one. See what they say. Who are they backing in the Government? You? Like hell. Rinehart? No, they're backing up 'Moses' Tyndall and his Abolitionist goon-squad who preach that rejuvenation is the work of Satan, and they're giving him enough strength that he's even getting *you* worried. How about Roderigo Aviado and his Solar Energy Project down in Antarctica? Do you know what he's been doing down there lately? You'd better find out, Dan. What's happening to the Mars Colony? Do you have any idea? You'd better find out. Have you gone to see any of the Noble Ten that are still rattling around? Oh, you ought to. How about all the suicides we've been having in the last ten years? What do the insurance people say about that?"

HE stopped, from lack of breath. Dan just stared at him, shaking his head like Silly Willy on the teevies. "Find out what you're doing, Dan—before you push this universal rejuvenation idea of yours through. Find out—if you've got the guts to find out, that is. We've got a monster on our hands, and now you've got to be Big Dan Fowler playing God and turning him loose on the world. Well, be careful. Find out first, while you can. It's all here to see, if you'll open your eyes, but you're all so dead sure that you want life

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everlasting that nobody's even bothered to *look*. And now it's become such a political bludgeon that nobody *dares* to look."

The model ship seemed to gleam in the dim laboratory light. Dan Fowler walked over to it, ran a finger up the shiny side to the pinpoint tip. His face was old, and something was gone from his eyes when he turned back to Paul. "You've known this for so long, and you never told me. You never said a word." He shook his head slowly. "I didn't know you hated me so much. But I'm not going to let you win this one, either, Paul. You're wrong. I'm going to prove it if it kills me."

V

"WELL, try his home number, then," Dan Fowler snarled into the speaker. He gnawed his cigar and fumed as long minutes spun off the wall clock. His fingers drummed the wall. "How's that? Dammit, I want to speak to Dwight McKenzie, his aide will *not* do—well, of course he's in town. I just saw him yesterday—"

He waited another five minutes, and then his half dollar clanked back in the return, with apologies. "All right, get his office when it opens, and call me back." He reeled off the number of the private booth.

Carl Golden looked up as he came back to the table and stirred sugar-cream into half-cold coffee. "No luck?"

"Son of a bitch has vanished." Dan leaned back against the wall, glowering at Carl and Jean. Through the transparent walls of the glassed-in-booth, they could see the morning breakfast-seekers drifting into the place. "We should have him pretty soon." He bit off the end of a fresh cigar, and assaulted it with a match.

"Dad, you know what Dr. Moss said—"

"Look, little girl—if I'm going to die in ten minutes, I'm going to smoke for those ten minutes and enjoy them," Dan snapped. The coffee was like lukewarm dishwater. Both the young people sipped theirs with bleary early-morning resignation. Carl Golden needed a shave badly. He opened his second pack of cigarettes. "Did you sleep on the way back?"

Dan snorted. "What do you think?"

"I think Paul might be lying to you."

Dan shot him a sharp glance. "Maybe—but I don't think so. Paul has always been fussy about telling the truth. He's all wrong, of course—" (fresh coffee, sugar-cream)—"but I think *he* believes his tale. Does it sound like he's lying to you?"

Carl sighed and shook his head. "No. I don't like it. It

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sounds to me as though he's pretty sure he's right."

Dan clanked the cup down and swore. "He's demented, that's what he is! He's waited too long, his brain's starting to go. If that story of his were true, why has he waited so long to tell somebody about it?"

"Maybe he wanted to see you hang yourself."

"But I can only hang myself on facts, not on the paranoid ramblings of a sick old man. The horrible thing is that he probably believes it—he almost had me believing it, for a while. But it isn't true. He's wrong—good lord, he's *got* to be wrong." Dan broke off, staring across at Carl. He gulped the last of the coffee. "If he *isn't* wrong, then that's all, kiddies. The mountain sinks into the sea, with us just ten feet from the top of it."

"Well, would *you* walk into the Center for a Retread now without being sure he's wrong?"

"Of course I wouldn't," said Dan peevishly. "Paul has taken the game right out from under our noses. We've got to stop everything and find out *now*, before we do another damned thing." The Senator dragged a sheaf of yellow paper out of his breast pocket and spread it out on the table. "I worked it out on the way back. We've got a nasty job on our hands. More than we can possibly squeeze in before the Hearing come up on December 15th. So number one job is to shift the Hearings back again. I'll take care of that as soon as I can get McKenzie on the wire."

"What's your excuse going to be?" Jean wanted to know.

"Anything but the truth. McKenzie thinks I'm going to win the fight at the Hearings, and he wants to be on the right side of the toast when it's buttered. He'll shift the date back to February 15th. Okay, next step: we need a crew. A crowd that can do fast, accurate, hard work and not squeal if they don't sleep for a month or so. Tommy Sandborn should be in Washington—he can handle statistics for us. In addition, we need a couple of good sharp detectives. Jean?"

THE girl nodded. "I can handle that end. It'll take some time getting them together, though."

"How much time?"

"Couple of days."

"Fine, we can have lots of work for them in a couple of days." The Senator turned back to Carl. "I want you to hit Starship Project first thing."

Carl shook his head. "I've got a better man for that job. Saw him last night, and he's dying for something to do. You don't know him—Terry Fisher. He'll know how to dig out what we want. He

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was doing it for five years on Mars."

"The alky?" Dan didn't like it. "We can't risk a slip to the teevies. We just don't dare."

"There won't be any slip. Terry jumped in the bottle to get away from Mars, that's all. He'll stay cold when it counts."

"Okay, if you say so. I want to see the setup there, too, but I want it ready for a quick scan. Get him down there this morning to soften things up and get it all out on the table for me. You'd better tackle the ad-men, then. Let's see—Tenner's Agency in Philly is a good place to start. Then hit Metro Insurance. Don't waste time with underlings, go to the top and wave my name around like an orange flag. They won't like it a damned bit, but they know I have the finger on Kornwall in Communications. We'll take his scalp if they don't play ball. All you'll have to do is convince them of that."

"What's on Kornwall?"

"Kornwall has been fronting for 'Moses' Tyndall for years. That's why Tyndall never bothered me too much, because we could get him through Kornwall any time we wanted to. And the ad-men and Metro have everything they own sunk into Tyndall's plans." Carl's frown still lingered. "Don't worry about it, son. It's okay."

"I think maybe you're underestimating John Tyndall."

"Why?"

"I worked for him once, remember? He doesn't like you. He knows it's going to be you or him, in the long haul, with nobody else involved. And you realize what happens if 'Moses' gets wind of this mess? Finds out what your brother told you, or even finds out that you're worried about something?"

Dan chewed his lip. "He *could* be a pain, couldn't he."

"He sure could. More than a pain, and Kornwall wouldn't be much help after the news got out."

"Well, we'll have to take the risk, that's all. We'll have to be fast and quiet." He pushed aside his coffee cup as the phone blinker started in. "I think that gets us started. Jean, you'll keep somebody on the switchboard, and keep track of us all. When I get through with McKenzie, I may be leaving the country for a while. You'll have to be my ears, and cover for me. *Yes*, yes. I was calling Dwight McKenzie—"

The phonebox squawked for a moment or two.

"Hello, Dwight? — What? Oh, thunder! Well, where is he? Timagami—Ontario? An island!" He covered the speaker and growled, "He's gone moose-hunting." Then: "Okay, get me Eastern Sea-Jet Charter Service."

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Five minutes later they walked out onto the street and split up in three different directions.

A long series of grey, flickering pictures, then, for Dan Fowler. A fast meal in the car to the Charter Service landing field. Morning sun swallowed up, sky gray, then almost black, temperature dropping, a grey drizzling rain. Cold. Wind carrying it across the open field in waves, slashing his cheeks with icy blades of water. Grey shape of the ski-plane ("Eight feet of snow up there, according to the IWB reports. Lake's frozen three feet thick. Going to be a rough ride, Senator"). Jean's quick kiss before he climbed up, the sharp worry in her eyes ("Got your pills, Dad? Try to sleep. Take it easy. Give me a call about anything—") (But there aren't any phones, the operator said. Better not tell her that. Why scare her any more? Damned heart, anyway). A wobbly takeoff that almost dumped his stomach in his lap, sent the briefcase flying across the cabin. Then rain, and grey-black nothing out through the mid-day view ports, heading north. Faster, faster, why can't you get this crate to move? Sorry, Senator. Nasty currents up here. Maybe we can try going higher—

Time! Paul had called it more precious than life, and now time flew screaming by in great deadly sweeps, like a black-winged buzzard. And through it all, weariness, tiredness that he had never felt before. Not years, not work. Weary body, yes—and time was running out, he should have rejuvenated years ago. But *now—what if Paul were right?*

Can't do it now. Not until Paul is wrong, a thousand times wrong. That was it, of course, that was the weariness that wasn't time-weariness or body-weariness. Just mind-weariness. Weariness at the thought of wasted work, the wasted years—a wasted life. Unless Paul is very wrong.

A snarl of disgust, a toggle switch snapped, a flickering teevie screen. Wonderful pickup these days. News of the World brought to you by Atomics International, the fuel to power the Starship—the President returned to Washington today after three-week vacation conference in Calcutta with Chinese and Indian dignitaries—full accord and a cordial ending to the meeting—American medical supplies to be made available—and on the home front, appropriations renewed for Antarctica Project, to bring solar energy into every home, Aviado was quoted as saying—huge Abolitionist rally last night in New Chicago as John 'Moses'

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Tyndall returned to that city to celebrate the fifteenth birthday of the movement that started there back in 2119—no violence reported as Tyndall lashed out at Senator Daniel Fowler's universal rejuvenation program—twenty-five hour work week hailed by Senator Rinehart of Alaska as a great progressive step for the American people—Senator Rinehart, chairman of the policy-making Criterion Committee held forth hope last night that rejuvenation techniques may increase the number of candidates to six hundred a year within five years—and now, news from the entertainment world—

Going down, then, into flurries of Northern snow, peering out at the whiter gloom below, a long stretch of white with blobs of black on either side, resolving into snow-laden black pines, a long flat lake-top of ice and snow. Taxi-ing down, engines roaring, sucking up snow into steam in the orange afterblast. And ahead, up from the lake, a black blot of a house, with orange window lights reflecting warmth and cheer against the wilderness outside—

Then Dwight McKenzie, peering out into the gloom, eyes widening in recognition, little mean eyes with streaks of fear through them, widening and then smiling, pumping his hand. "Dan! My god, I couldn't *imagine*—hardly ever see anybody up here, you know. Come in, come in, you must be half frozen. What's happened? Something torn loose down in Washington?" And more questions, fast, tumbling over each other, no answers wanted, talky-talk questions to cover surprise and fear and the one large question of why Dan Fowler should be dropping down out of the sky on *him*, which question he didn't think he wanted answered just yet—

A huge, rugged room, blazing fire in a mammoth fireplace at the end, moose heads, a rug of thick black bear hide. "Like to come up here a day or two ahead of the party, you know," McKenzie was saying. "Does a man good to commune with his soul once in a while. Do you like to hunt? You should join us, Dan. Libby and Donaldson will be up tomorrow with a couple of guides. We could find you an extra gun. They say hunting should be good this year—

One chair against the fireplace, a book hastily thrown down beside it, SEXTRA SPECIAL, Cartoons by Kulp. Great book for soul-searching Senators. Things were all out of focus after the sudden change from the cold, but now Dan was beginning to see. One book, one

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chair, but two half-filled sherry glasses at the sideboard—

"Can't wait, Dwight, I have to get back to the city, but I couldn't find you down there, and they didn't know when you were coming back. I just wanted to let you know that I put you to all that trouble for nothing—we don't need the Hearing date in December, after all."

Wariness suddenly in McKenzie's eyes. "Well! Nice of you to think of it, Dan—but it wasn't really any trouble. No trouble at all. December 15th is fine, as a matter of fact, better than the February date would have been. Give the Committee a chance to collect itself during the Holidays, ha, ha."

"Well, it now seems that it *wouldn't* be so good for me, Dwight. I'd much prefer it to be changed back to the February date."

"Well, now." Pause. "Dan, we *have* to settle these things sooner or later, you know. I don't know whether we can do that now—"

"Don't know! Why not?"

The moose-hunter licked both lips, couldn't keep his eyes on Dan's eyes, focussed on his nose instead, as if the nose were *really* the important part of the conversation. "It isn't just me that makes these decisions, Dan. Other people have to be consulted. It's pretty late to catch them now, you know. It might be pretty hard to do that—"

No more smiles from Dan. "Now look—you make the calendar, and you can change it." Face getting red, getting angry—careful, Dan, those two sherry glasses, watch what you say— "I want it changed back. And I've got to know right now."

"But you told me you'd be all ready to roll by December 15th—"

To hell with caution—he *had* to have time. "Look, there's no reason you can't do it if you want to, Dwight. I'd consider it a personal favor—I repeat, a very large personal favor—if you'd make the arrangements. I won't forget it—" What did the swine want, an arm off at the roots?

"Sorry," said a voice from the rear door of the room. Walter Rinehart walked across to the sideboard. "You don't mind if I finish this, Dwight?"

A deep breath from McKenzie, like a sigh of relief. "Go right ahead, Walt. Sherry, Dan?"

"No, I don't think so." It was Walter, all right. Tall, upright, dignified Walter, fine shock of wavy hair that was white as the snow outside. Young-old lines on his face. Some men looked finer after rejuvenation, much finer than before. There had been a chilly look about Walter Rinehart's eyes be-

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fore his first Retread. Not now. A fine man, like somebody's dear old grandfather. Just give him a chunk of wood to whittle and a jackblade to whittle it with—

But inside, the mind was the same. Inside, no changes. Author of the Rinehart Criteria, the royal road to a self-perpetuating "immortal elite."

DAN turned his back on Rinehart and said to McKenzie: "I want the date changed."

"I—I can't do it, Dan." An inquiring glance at Rinehart, a faint smiling nod in return.

He knew he'd blundered then, blundered badly. McKenzie was afraid. McKenzie wanted another lifetime, one of these days. He'd decided that Rinehart would be the one who could give it to him. But worse, far worse: Rinehart knew now that something had happened, something was wrong. "What's the matter, Dan?" he said smoothly. "You need more time? Why? You had it before, and you were pretty eager to toss it up. Well, what's happened, Dan?"

That was all. Back against the wall. The thought of bluffing it through, swallowing the December 15th date and telling them to shove it flashed through his mind. He threw it out violently. his heart sinking. That was only a few more days. They had weeks of work ahead of them. They needed more time, they *had* to have it—

Rinehart was grinning confidently. "Of course I'd like to cooperate, Dan. Only I have some plans for the Hearings, too. You've been getting on people's nerves, down in the city. There's even been talk of reconsidering your rejuvenation permit—"

Your move, Dan. God, what a blunder! Why did you ever come up here? And every minute you stand there with your jaw sagging just tells Rinehart how tight he's got you—*do* something, *anything*—

There was a way. Would Carl understand it? Carl had begged him never to use it, ever, under any circumstances. And Carl had trusted him when he had said he wouldn't—but if Carl were standing here now, he'd say yes, go ahead, use it, wouldn't he? He'd have to—

"I want the Hearings on February 15th," Dan said to Rinehart.

"Sorry, Dan. We can't be tossing dates around like that. Unless you'd care to tell me why."

"Okay." Dan grabbed his hat angrily. "I'll make a formal request for the change tomorrow morning, and read it on the teevies. Then I'll also announce a feature at-

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traction that the people can look forward to when the Hearing date comes. We weren't planning to use it, but I guess you'd like to have both barrels right in the face, so that's what we'll give you."

Walter Rinehart roared with laughter. "*Another* feature attraction? You do dig them up, don't you? Ken Armstrong's dead, you know."

"Peter Golden's widow isn't."

THE smile faded on Rinehart's face. He looked suddenly like a man carved out of grey stone. Dan trembled, let the words sink in. "You didn't think *anybody* knew about that, did you, Walt? Sorry. We've got the story on Peter Golden. Took us quite a while to piece it together, but we did with the help of his son. Carl remembers his father before the accident, you see, quite well. His widow remembers him even before that. And we have some fascinating recordings that Peter Golden made when he applied for rejuvenation, and when he appealed the Committee's decisions. Some of the private interviews, too, Walter."

"I gave Peter Golden forty more years of life," Rinehart said.

"You crucified him," said Dan, bluntly.

There was silence, long silence. Then: "Are you selling?"

"I'm selling." Cut out my tongue, Carl, but I'm selling.

"How do I know you won't break it anyway?"

"You don't know. Except that I'm telling you I won't."

Rinehart soaked that in with the last gulp of sherry. Then he smashed the glass on the stone floor. "Change the date," he said to McKenzie. "Then throw this vermin out of here."

Back in the snow and darkness Dan tried to breathe again, and couldn't quite make it. He had to stop and rest twice going down to the plane. Then he was sick all the way back.

VI

EARLY evening, as the plane dropped him off in New York Crater, and picked up another charter. Two cold eggs and some scalding coffee, eaten standing up at the airport counter. Great for the stomach, but there wasn't time to stop. Anyway, Dan's stomach wasn't in the mood for dim lights and pale wine, not just this minute. Questions howling through his mind. The knowledge that he had made the one Class A collossal blunder of his thirty years in politics, this last half-day. A miscalculation of a man! He should have known about McKenzie—at least suspected. McKenzie

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was getting old, he wanted a Retread, and wanted it badly. Before, he had planned to get it through Dan. Then something changed his mind, and he decided Rinehart would end up on top.

Why?

Armstrong's suicide, of course. Pretty good proof that even Rinehart hadn't known it was a suicide. If Carl had brought back evidence of murder, Dan would win, McKenzie thought. But evidence of suicide—it was shaky. Walt Rinehart has his hooks in too deep.

They piped down the fifteen minute warning for the Washington Jet. Dan gulped the last of his coffee, and found a visi-phone booth with a scrambler in working order. Two calls. The first one to Jean, to line up round-the-clock guards for Peter Golden's widow on Long Island. Jean couldn't keep surprise out of her voice. Dan grunted and didn't elaborate—just get them out there.

Then a call to locate Carl. He chewed his cigar nervously.

Two minutes of waiting while they called Carl from wherever he was. Then: "I just saw McKenzie. I found him hiding in Rhinehart's hip pocket."

"Jesus, Dan. We've got to have time."

"We've got it—but the price was very steep, son."

Silence then as Carl peered at him. Finally: "I see."

"If I hadn't been in such a hurry, if I'd only thought it out," Dan said miserably. "It was an awful error—and all mine, too."

"Well, don't go out and shoot yourself. I suppose it had to happen sooner or later. What about Mother?"

"She'll be perfectly safe. They won't get within a mile of her. Look, son—is Fisher doing all right?"

Carl nodded. "I talked to him an hour ago. He'll be ready for you by tomorrow night, he thinks."

"Sober?"

"Sober. And mad. He's the right guy for the job." Worried lines deepened on Golden's forehead. "Everything's O.K.? Rinehart won't dare—"

"I scared him. He'd almost forgotten. Everything's fine." Dan rang off, scowling. He wished he was as sure as he sounded. Rinehart's back was to the wall, now. Dan wasn't too sure he liked it that way.

An hour later he was in Washington, and Jean was dragging him into the Volta. "If you don't sleep now, I'll have you put to sleep. Now shut up while I drive you home."

A soft bed, darkness, escape. When had he slept last? It was heaven.

HE slept the clock around, which he had not intended,

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and caught the next night-jet to Las Vegas, which he had intended. There was some delay with the passenger list after he had gone aboard, a fight of some sort, and the jet took off four minutes late. Dan slept again, fitfully.

Somebody slid into the adjoining seat. "Well! Good old Dan Fowler!"

A gaunt, frantic-looking man, with skin like cracked parchment across his high cheekbones, and a pair of Carradine eyes looking down at Dan. If Death should walk in human flesh, Dan thought, it would look like John Tyndall.

"What do you want, 'Moses'?"

"Just dropped by to chat," said Tyndall. "You're heading for Las Vegas, eh? Why?"

Dan jerked, fumbled for the upright-button. "I like the climate out there. If you want to talk, talk and get it over with."

Tyndall lifted a narrow foot and gave the recline-button a sharp jab, dumping the Senator back against the seat. "You're onto something. I can smell it cooking, and I want my share, right now."

Dan stared into the gaunt face, and burst out laughing. He had never actually been so close to John Tyndall before, and he did *not* like the smell, which had brought on the laugh, but he knew all about Tyndall. More than Tyndall himself knew, probably. He could even remember the early rallies Tyndall had led, feeding on the fears and suspicions and nasty rumors grown up in the early days. It was evil, they had said. This was not God's way, this was Man's way, as evil as Man was evil. If God had wanted Man to live a thousand years, he would have given him such a body—

Or:

They'll use it for a tool! Political football. They'll buy and sell with it. They'll make a cult of it, they're doing it right now! Look at Walter Rinehart. Did you hear about his scheme? To keep it down to five hundred a year? They'll make themselves a ruling class, an immortal elite, with Rinehart for their Black Pope. Better that *nobody* should have it—

Or:

Immortality, huh? But what kind? You hear what happened to Harvey Tatum? That's right, the jet-car man, big business. He was one of their 'Noble Ten' they're always bragging about. But they say he had to have special drugs every night, that he had *changed*. That's right, if he didn't get these drugs, see, he'd go mad and try to suck blood and butcher up children—oh, they didn't dare publish it, had to put him out

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of the way quietly, but my brother-in-law was down in Lancaster one night when—

All it really needed was the man, and one day there was 'Moses' Tyndall. Leader of the New Crusade for God. Small, at first. But the ad-men began supporting him, broadcasting his rallies, playing him up big. Abolish rejuvenation, it's a blot against Man's immortal soul. Amen. Then the insurance people came along, with money. (The ad-men and the insurance people weren't too concerned about Man's immortal soul—they'd take their share now, thanks—but this didn't bother Tyndall too much. Misguided, but they were on God's side. He prayed for them.) So they gave Tyndall the first Abolitionist seat in the Senate, in 2124, just nine years ago, and the fight between Rinehart and Dan Fowler that was brewing even then had turned into a three-cornered fight—

Dan grinned up at Tyndall and said, "Go away, John. Don't bother me."

"You've got something," Tyndall snarled. "What is that damn shadow of yours nosing around Tenner's for? Why the sudden leaping interest in Nevada? Two trips in three days—what are you trying to track down?"

"Why on Earth should I tell you anything, Holy Man?"

The parchment face wrinkled unpleasantly. "Because it would be very smart, that's why. Rinehart's out of it, now. Washed up, finished, thanks to you. Now it's just you or me, one or the other. You're in the way, and you're going to gotten out of the way when you've finished up Rinehart, because I'm going to start rolling them. Go along with me now and you won't get smashed, Dan."

"Get out of here," Dan snarled, sitting bolt upright. "You gave it to Carl Golden, a long time ago when he was with you, remember? Carl's my boy now—do you think I'll swallow the same bait?"

"You'd be smart if you did." The man leaned forward. "I'll let you in on a secret. I've just recently had a—*vision*, you might say. There are going to be riots and fires and shouting, around the time of the Hearings. People will be killed. Lots of people—spontaneous outbursts of passion, of course, the great voice of the people rising against the Abomination. And against *you*, Dan. A few Repeaters may be taken out and hanged, and then when you have won against Rinehart, you'll find people thinking that you're really a traitor—"

"Nobody will swallow that," Dan snapped.

"Just watch and see. I can still call it off, if you say so." He stood up quickly as

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Dan's face went purple. "New Chicago," he said smoothly. "Have to see a man here, and then get back to the Capitol. Happy hunting, Dan. You know where to reach me."

He strode down the aisle of the ship, leaving Dan staring bleakly at an empty seat.

Paul, Paul—

He met Terry Fisher at the landing field in Las Vegas. A firm handshake, clear brown eyes looking at him the way a four-year-old looks at Santa Claus. "Glad you could come tonight, Sen- [illegible] had a busy couple of days. I think you— terested." Remarkable restraint in the man's voice. His face was full of things unsaid. Dan caught it; he knew faces, read them like typescript. "What is it, son?"

"Wait until you see." Fisher laughed nervously. "I thought for a while that I was back on Mars."

"Cigar?"

"No thanks. I never use them."

The car broke through darkness across bumpy pavement. The men sat silently. Then a barbed-wire enclosure loomed up, and a guard walked over, peered at their credentials, and waved them through. Ahead lay a long, low row of buildings, and a tall something spearing up into the clear desert night. They stopped at the first building, and hurried up the steps.

Small, red-faced Lijinsky greeted them, all warm handshake and enthusiasm and unmistakeable happiness and surprise. "A real pleasure, Senator! We haven't had a direct governmental look-see in quite a while. I'm glad I'm here to show you around."

"Everythi[illegible] along, eh?"

"Oh, yes! She'll be a ship to be proud of. Now, I think we can arrange some quarters for you for the night— the morning w[illegible] sit down and ha[illegible]nce, long talk."

Terry Fisher was shaking his head. "I think the Senator would like to see the ship now—isn't that right, Senator?"

Lijinsky's eyes opened wide, his head bobbed in surprise. Young-old creases on his face flickered. "Tonight? Oh, you can't really be serious. Why, it's almost two in the morning! We only have a skeleton crew working at night. Tommorow you can see—"

"Tonight, if you don't mind." Dan tried to keep the sharp edge out of his voice. "Unless you have some specific objection, of course."

"Objection? None whatsoever." Lijinsky seemed puzzled, and a little hurt. But he bounced back: "To-

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night it is, then. Let's go." There was no doubting the little man's honesty. He wasn't hiding anything, just surprised. But a moment later there was concern on his face as he led them out toward the factory compounds. "There's no question of appropriations, I hope, Senator?"

"No, no. Nothing of the sort."

"Well, I'm certainly glad to hear that. Sometimes our contacts from Washington are a little disappointed in the Ship, of course."

Dan's throat tightened. "Why?"

"No reason, really. We're making fine progress, it isn't that. Yes, things really buzz around here; just ask Mr. Fisher about *that*—he was here all day watching the workers. But there are always minor changes in plans, of course, as we recognize more of the problems."

Terry Fisher grimaced silently, and followed them into a small Whirlwind groundcar. The little gyrocar bumped down the road on its single wheel, down into a gorge, then out onto the flats. Dan strained his eyes, peering ahead at the spear of Starship gleaming in the distant night-lights. Pictures from the last Starship Progress Report flickered through his mind, and a frown gathered as they came closer to the ship. Then the car halted on the edge of the building-pit and they blinked down and up at the scaffolded monster.

Dan didn't even move from the car. He just stared. The report had featured photos, projected testing dates—even ventured a possible date for launching, with the building of the Starship so near to completion. That had been a month ago. Now Dan stared at the ship and shook his head, uncomprehending.

The hull-plates were off again, lying in heaps on the ground in a mommoth circle. The ship was a skeleton, a long, gawky structure of naked metal beams. Even now a dozen men were scampering around the scaffolding, before Dan's incredulous eyes, and he saw some of the beaming coming *off* the body of the ship, being dropped onto the crane, moving slowly to the ground.

Ten years ago the ship had looked the same. As he watched, he felt a wave of hopelessness sweep through him., a sense of desolate, empty bitterness. Ten years—

His eyes met Terry Fisher's in the gloom of the car, begging to be told it wasn't so. Fisher shook his head.

Then Dan said: "I think I've seen enough. Take me back to the air field."

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"IT was the same thing on Mars," Fisher was telling him as the return jet speared East into the dawn. "The refining and super-refining, the slowing down, the changes in viewpoint and planning. I went up there ready to beat the world barehanded, to work on the frontier, to build that colony, and maybe lead another one. I even worked out the plans for a break-away colony—we would need colony-builders when we went to the stars, I thought." He shrugged sadly. "Carl told you, I guess. They considered the break-away colony, carefully, and then Barness decided it was really too early. Too much work already, with just one colony. And there was, in a sense: frantic activity, noise, hubbub, hard work, fancy plans—all going nowhere. No drive, no real direction." He shrugged again. "I did a lot of drinking before they threw me off Mars."

"Nobody saw it happening?"

"It wasn't the sort of thing you see. You could only *feel* it. It started when Armstrong came to the colony, rejuvenated, to take over its developement. And eventually, I think Armstrong did see it. That's why he suicided."

"But the Starship," Dan cried. "It was almost built, and they were *tearing it down*. I saw it with my own eyes."

"Ah, yes. For the twenty-seventh time, I think. A change in the engineering thinking, that's all. Keller and Lijinsky suddenly came to the conclusion that the whole thing might fall apart in midair at the launching. Can you imagine it? When rockets have been built for years, running to Mars every two months? But they could prove it on paper, and by the time they got through explaining it every damned soul on the project was saying yes, it might fall apart at the launching. Why, it's a standing joke with the workers. They call Keller "Old Jet Propulsion" and always have a good laugh. But then, Keller and Stark and Lijinsky should know what's what. They've all been rejuvenated, and working on the ship for years." Fisher's voice was heavy with anger.

Dan didn't answer. There didn't seem to be much to answer, and he just couldn't tell Fisher how it felt to have a cold blanket of fear wrapping around his heart, so dreadful and cold that he hardly dared look five minutes ahead right now. *We have a Monster on our hands—*

VII

HE was sick when they

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reached Washington. The pain in his chest became acute as he walked down the gangway, and by the time he found a seat in the terminal and popped a nitro-tablet under his tongue he was breathing in deep, ragged gasps. He sat very still, trying to lean back against the seat, and quite suddenly he realized that he was very, very ill. The good red-headed Dr. Moss would smile in satisfaction, he thought bitterly. There was sweat on his forehead; it had never seemed very probable to him that he might one day die—he didn't *have* to die in this great, wonderful world of new bodies for old, he could live on, and on, and on. He could live to see the Golden Centuries of Man. A solar system teeming with life. Ships to challenge the stars, the barriers breaking, crumbling before their very eyes. Other changes, as short-lived Man became long-lived Man. Changes in teaching, in thinking, in feeling. Disease, the Enemy, was crushed. Famine, the Enemy, slinking back into the dim memory of history. War, the Enemy, pointless to extinction.

All based on one principle: Man must live. He need not die. If a man could live forty years instead of twenty, had it been wrong to fight the plagues that struck him down in his youth? If he could live sixty years instead of forty, had the great researchers of the 1940's and '50's and '60's been wrong? Was it any more wrong to want to live a thousand years? Who could say that it was?

He took a shuddering breath, and then nodded to Terry Fisher, and walked unsteadily to the cab stand. He would not believe what he had seen at Starship Project. It was not enough. Collect the evidence, *then* conclude. He gave Fisher an ashen smile. "It's nothing. The ticker kicks up once in a while, that's all. Let's go see what Carl and Jean and the boys have dug up." Fisher smiled grimly, an eager gleam in his eye.

Carl and Jean and the boys had dug up plenty. The floor of offices Dan rented for the work of his organization was going like Washington Terminal at rush hour. A dozen people were here and there, working with tapes, papers, program cards. Jean met them at the door, hustled them into the private offices in the back. "Carl just got here, too. He's down eating. The boys outside are trying to make sense out of his insurance and advertising figures."

"He got next to them okay?"

"Sure—but you were right, they didn't like it."

"What sort of reports?"

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THE girl sighed. "Only prelims. Almost all of the stuff is up in the air, which makes it hard to evaluate. The ad-men have to be figuring what they're going to do next half-century, so that they'll be there with the right thing when the time comes. But it seems they don't like what they see. People have to buy what the ad-men are selling, or the ad-men shrivel up, and already the trend seems to be showing up. People aren't in such a rush to buy. Don't have the same sense of urgency that they used to—" Her hands fluttered. "Well, as I say, it's all up in the air. Let the boys analyze for a while. The suicide business is a little more tangible. The rates are up, all over. But break it into first-generation and Repeaters, and it's pretty clear who's pushing it up."

"Like Armstrong," said Dan slowly.

Jean nodded. "Oh, here's Carl now."

He came in, rubbing his hands, and gave Dan a queer look. "Everything under control, Dan?"

Dan nodded. He told Carl about Tyndall's proposition. Carl gave a wry grin. "He hasn't changed a bit, has he?"

"Yes, he has. He's gotten lots stronger."

Carl scowled, and slapped the desk with his palm. "You should have stopped him, Dan. I told you that a long time ago—back when I first came in with you. He was aiming for your throat even then, trying to use me and what I knew about Dad to sell the country a pack of lies about you. He almost did, too. I hated your guts back then. I thought you were the rottenest man that ever came up in politics, until you got hold of me and pounded sense into my head. And Tyndall's never forgiven you that, either."

"All right—we're still ahead of him. Have you just finished with the ad-men?"

"Oh, no. I just got back from a trip south. My nose is still cold."

Dan's eyebrows went up. "And how was Dr. Aviado? I haven't seen a report from Antarctica Project for five years."

"Yes you have. You just couldn't read them. Aviado is quite a theoretician. That's how he got his money and his Project, down there, with plenty of room to build his reflectors and nobody around to get hurt if something goes wrong. Except a few penguins. And he's done a real job of developement down there since his rejuvenation."

"Ah." Dan glanced up hopefully.

"Now there," said Carl, "is a real lively project. Solar energy into power on a utilitarian level. The man is fanatic, of course, but with his

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plans he could actually be producing in another five years." He lit a cigarette, drew on it as though it were bitter.

"Could?"

"Seems he's gotten sidetracked a bit," said Carl.

Dan glanced at Terry Fisher. "How?"

"Well, his equipment is working fine, and he can concentrate solar heat from ten square miles onto a spot the size of a manhole cover. But he hasn't gone too far converting it to useful power yet." Carl suddenly burst out laughing. "Dan, this'll kill you. Billions and billions of calories of solar heat concentrated down there, and what do you think he's doing with it? He's digging a hole in the ice two thousand feet deep and a mile wide. That's what."

"A hole in the ice!"

"Exactly. Conversion? Certainly—but first we want to be sure we've right. So right now his whole crew is very busy *trying to melt down Antartica.* And if you give him another ten years, he'll have it done, by god."

THIS was the last, most painful trip of all.

Dan didn't even know why he was going, except that Paul had told him he should go, and no stone could be left unturned.

The landing in New York Crater had been rough, and Dan had cracked his elbow on the bulkhead; he nursed it now as he left the Volta on the deserted street of the crater city, and entered the low one-story lobby of the groundscraper. The clerk took his name impassively, and he sat down to wait.

An hour passed, then another.

Then: "Mr. Devlin will see you now, Senator."

Down in the elevator, four—five—six stories. Above him was the world; here, deep below, with subtly efficient ventilators and shafts and exotic cubby-holes for retreat, a man could forget that a world above existed.

Soft lighting in the corridor, a golden plastic door. The door swung open, and a tiny old man blinked out.

"Mr. Chauncey Devlin?"

"Senator Fowler!" The little old man beamed. "Come in, come in— my dear fellow, if I'd realized it was you, I'd never have dreamed of keeping you so long—" He smiled, obviously distressed. "Retreat has its disadvantages, too, you see. Nothing is perfect but life, as they say. When *you've* lived for a hundred and ninety years, you'll be glad to get away from people, and to be able to keep them out, from time to time."

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In better light Dan stared openly at the man. A hundred and ninety years. It was incredible. He told the man so.

"Isn't it, though?" Chauncey Devlin chirped. "Well, I was a was-baby! Can you imagine? Born in London in 1945. But I don't even think about those horrid years any more. Imagine—people dropping bombs on each other!"

A tiny bird of a man—three times rejuvenated, and still the mind was sharp, the eyes were sharp. The face was a strange mixture of recent youth and very great age. It stirred something deep inside Dan—almost a feeling of loathing. An uncanny feeling.

"We've always known your music," he said. "We've always loved it. Just a week ago we heard the Washington Philharmonic doing—"

"The eight." Chauncey Devlin cut him off distainfully. "They always do the eighth."

"It's a great symphony," Dan protested.

Devlin chuckled, and bounced about the room like a little boy. "It was only half finished when they chose me for the big plunge," he said. "Of course I was doing a lot of conducting then, too. Now I'd much rather just write." He hurried across the long, softly-lit room to the piano, came back with a sheaf of papers. "Do you read music? This is just what I've been doing recently. Can't get it quite right, but it'll come, it'll come."

"Which will this be?" asked Dan.

"The tenth. The ninth was under contract, of course—strictly a pot-boiler, I'm afraid. Thought it was pretty good at the time, but *this* one—ah!" He fondled the smooth sheets of paper. "In this one I could *say* something. Always before it was hit and run, make a stab at it, then rush on to stab at something else. Not *this* one." He patted the manuscript happily. "With this one there will be *nothing* wrong."

"It's almost finished?"

"Oh, no. Oh, my goodness no! A fairly acceptable first movement, but not what I *will* do on it—as I go along."

"I see. I—understand. How long have you worked on it now?"

"Oh, I don't know— I must have it down here somewhere. Oh, yes. Started it in April of 2057. Seventy-seven years."

They talked on, until it became too painful. Then Dan rose, and thanked his host, and started back for the corridor and life again. He had never even mentioned his excuse for coming, and nobody had missed it.

Chauncey Devlin, a tiny, perfect wax-image of a man,

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so old, so wise, so excited and full of enthusiasm and and energy and carefulness, working eagerly, happily—

Accomplishing n o t h i n g. Seventy-seven years. The picture of a man who had been great, and who had slowly ground to a standstill.

And now Dan knew that he hadn't really been looking at Chauncey Devlin at all. He had been looking at the whole human race.

VIII

FEBRUARY 15th, 2135. The day of the Hearings, to consider the charges and petition formally placed by The H o n o r a b l e Daniel Fowler, Independent Senator from the Great State of Illinois. The long oval hearing-room was filling early; the gallery above was packed by 9:05 in the morning. Teevie-boys all over the place. The Criterion Committee members, taking their places in twos and threes—some old, some young, some rejuvenated, some not, taking their places in the oval. Then the other Senators—not the P r e s i d e n t, of course, but he'll be well represented by Senator Rinehart himself, ah yes. Don't worry about the President.

Bad news in the papers. Trouble in New Chicago, where so much trouble seems to start these days. Bomb thrown in the Medical Center out there, a *bomb* of all things! Shades of Lenin. Couple of people killed, and one of the doctors nearly beaten to death on the street before the police arrived to clear the mob away. Dan Fowler's name popping up here and there, not pleasantly. Whispers and accusations, *s o t t o v o c e*. And 'Moses' Tyndall's n e t w o r k hookup last night—of course nobody with any sense listens to *him*, but did you hear that hall go wild?

Rinehart—yes, that's him. Well, he's got a right to look worried. If Dan can unseat him here and now, he's washed up. According to the rules of the Government, you know, Fowler can legally petition for Rinehart's chairmanship without risking it as a platform plank in the next election, and get a hearing here, and then if the Senate votes him in, he's got the election made. Dan's smart. They're scared to throw old Rinehart out, of course—after all, he's let them keep their thumbs on rejuvination all these years with his Criteria, and if they supported him they got named, and if they didn't, they didn't get named. Not quite as crude as that, of course, but that's what it boiled down to, let me tell you! But now, if they reject Dan's petition and the people give him the election

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over their heads, they're *really* in a spot. Out on the ice on their rosy red—

How's that? Can't be too long now. I see Tyndall has just come in, Bible and all. See if he's got any tomatoes in his pockets. Ol' Moses really gets you going—ever listen to him talk? Well, it's just as well. Damn, but it's hot in here—

In the rear chamber, Dan mopped his brow, popped a pill under his tongue, dragged savagely on the long black cigar. "You with me, son?"

Carl nodded.

"You know what it means."

"Of course. There's your buzzer. Better get in there." Carl went back to Jean and the others around the 80-inch screen, set deep in the wall. Dan put his cigar down, gently, as though he planned to be back to smoke it again before it went out, and walked through the tall oak doors.

THE hubbub caught, rose up for a few moments, then dropped away. Dan took his seat, grinned across at Libby, leaned his head over to drop an aside into Parker's ear. Rinehart staring at the ceiling as the charges are read off in a droning voice—

—Whereas the criteria for selection of candidates for sub-total prosthesis, first written by the Honorable Walter Rinehart of the Great State of Alaska, have been found to be inadequate, outdated, and utterly inappropriate to the use of sub-total prosthesis that is now possible—

—And whereas that same Honorable Walter Rinehart has repeatedly used the criteria, not in the just, honorable, and humble way in which such criteria must be regarded, but rather as a tool and weapon for his own furtherance and for that of his friends and associates—

Dan waited, patiently. Was Rinehart's face whiter than it had been? Was the Hall quieter now? Maybe not—but wait for the petition—

—The Senate of the United States of North America is formally petitioned that the Honorable Walter Rinehart should be displaced from his seat as Chairman in the Criterion Committee, and that his seat as Chairman of that committee should be resumed by the Honorable Daniel Fowler, author of this petition, who has hereby pledged himself before God to seek through this Committee in any and every way possible, the extention of the benefits of sub-total prosthesis techniques to all the people of this land and not to a chosen few—

Screams, hoots, cat-calls, applause, all from the gallery. None below—Senatorial dignity forbade, and the anti-sound glass kept the noise out of the chamber below.

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Then Dan Fowler stood up, an older Dan Fowler than most of them seemed to remember. "You have heard the charges which have been read. I stand before you now, formally, to withdraw them—"

What, what? Jaws sagging, eyes wide; teevie camera frozen on the Senator's face, then jerking wildly around the room to catch the reaction—

"You have also heard the petition which has been read. I stand before you now, formally, to withdraw it—"

Slowly, measuring each word, he told them. He knew that words were not enough, but he told them. "Only 75,000 men and women have undergone the process, at this date, out of almost two hundred million people on this continent, yet it has already begun to sap our strength. We were told that no change was involved, and indeed we saw no change, but it was there, my friends. The suicides of men like Kenneth Armstrong did not just *occur*. There are many reasons that might lead a man to take his life in this world of ours—selfishness, self-pity, hatred of the world or of himself, bitterness, resentment—but it was none of these that motivated Kenneth Armstrong. *His death was the act of a bewildered, defeated mind*—for he saw what I am telling you now and knew that it was true. He saw Starships built and rebuilt, and never launched—colonies dying of lethargy, because there was no longer any drive behind them—brilliant minds losing sight of goals, and drifting into endless inconsequential digressions—lifetimes wasted in repetition, in re-doing and re-writing and re-living. He saw it: the downward spiral which could only lead to death for all of us in the last days.

"This is why I withdraw the charges and petition of this Hearing. This is why I reject rejuvenation, and declare that it is a monstrous thing *which we must not allow to continue*. This is why I now announce that I personally will nominate the Honorable John Tyndall for President in the elections next spring, and will promise him my pledged support, my political organization and experience, and my every personal effort to see that he is elected."

IT seemed that there would be no end to it, when Dan Fowler had finished. 'Moses' Tyndall had sat staring as the blood drained out of his sallow face; his jaw gaped, and he half-rose from his chair, then sank back with a ragged cough, staring at the Senator as if he had

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been transformed into a snake. Carl and Terry were beside Dan in a moment, clearing a way back to the rear chambers, then down the steps of the building to a cab. Senator Libby intercepted them there, his face purple with rage, and McKenzie, bristling and indignant. "You've lost your mind, Dan."

"I have not. I am perfectly sane."

"But *Tyndall!* He'll turn Washington into a grand revival meeting, he'll—"

"Then we'll cut him down to size. He's *my* candidate, remember, not his own. He'll play my game if it pays him well enough. But I want an Abolitionist administration, and I'm going to get one."

In the cab he stared glumly out the window, his heart racing, his whole body shaking in reaction now. "You know what it means," he said to Carl for the tenth time.

"Yes, Dan, I know."

"It means no rejuvenation, for you or for any of us. It means proving something to people that they just don't want to believe, and cramming it down their throats if we have to. It means taking away their right to keep on living."

"I know all that."

"Carl, if you want out—"

"Yesterday was the time."

"Okay then. We've got work to do."

IX

UP in the offices again, Dan was on the phone immediately. He knew politics, and people—like the jungle cat knows the whimpering creatures he stalks. He knew that it was the first impact, the first jolting blow that would win for them, or lose for them. Everything had to hit right. He had spent his life working with people, building friends, building power, banking his resources, investing himself. Now the time had come to cash in.

Carl and Jean and the others worked with him—a dreadful afternoon and evening, fighting off newsmen, blocking phone calls, trying to concentrate in the midst of bedlam. The campaign to elect Tyndall had to start *now*. They labored to record a work-schedule, listing names, outlining telegrams, drinking coffee, as Dan swore at his dead cigar like old times once again, and grinned like a madman as the plans slowly developed and blossomed out.

Then the phone jangled, and Dan reached out for it. It was that last small effort that did it. A sledge-hammer blow, from deep within him, sharp agonizing pain, a driving hunger for the air that he just couldn't drag into his lungs. He let out a small, sharp cry, and doubled over

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with pain. They found him seconds later, still clinging to the phone, his breath so faint as to be no breath at all.

He regained consciousness hours later. He stared about him at the straight lines of the ceiling, at the hospital bed and the hospital window. Dimly he saw Carl Golden, head dropping on his chest, dozing at the side of the bed.

There was a hissing sound, and he raised a hand, felt the tiny oxygen mask over his mouth and nose. But even with that help, every breath was an agony of pain and weariness.

He was so very tired. But slowly, through the fog, he remembered. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead, drenched his body. *He was alive.* Yet he remembered crystal clear the thought that had exploded in his mind in the instant the blow had come. *I'm dying. This is the end—it's too late now.* And then, cruelly, *why did I wait so long?*

He struggled against the mask, sat bolt upright in bed. "I'm going to die," he whispered, then caught his breath. Carl sat up, smiled at him.

"Lie back, Dan. Get some rest."

Had he heard? Had Carl heard the fear he had whispered? Perhaps not. He lay back, panting, as Carl watched. Do you know what I'm thinking, Carl? I'm thinking how much I want to live. People don't *need* to die —wasn't that what Dr. Moss had said? It's such a terrible waste, he had said.

Too late, now. Dan's hands trembled. He remembered the Senators in the oval hall, hearing him speak his brave words; he remembered Rinehart's face, and Tyndall's, and Libby's. He was committed now. Yesterday, no. Now, yes.

Paul had been right, and Dan had proved it.

His eyes moved across to the bedside table. A telephone. He was still alive, Moss had said that sometimes it was possible *even when you were dying.* That was what they did with your father, wasn't it, Carl? Brave Peter Golden, who had fought Rinehart so hard, who had begged and pleaded for universal rejuvenation, waited and watched and finally caught Rinehart red-handed, to prove that he was corrupting the law and expose him. Simple, honest Peter Golden, applying so naively for his rightful place on the list, when his cancer was diagnosed. Peter Golden had been all but dead when he had finally whispered defeat, and given Rinehart his perpetual silence in return for life. They had snatched him from death, indeed. But he had been crucified all the same. They had torn away every-

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thing, and found a coward underneath.

Coward? Why? Was it wrong to want to live? Dan Fowler was dying. Why must it be him? He had committed himself to a fight, yes, but there were others, young men, who could fight. Men like Peter Golden's son.

But you are their leader, Dan. If you fail them, they will never win.

Carl was watching him silently, his lean dark face expressionless. Could the boy read his mind? Was it possible that he knew what Dan Fowler was thinking? Carl had always understood before. It had seemed that sometimes Carl had understood Dan far better than Dan did. He wanted to cry out to Carl now, spill over his dreadful thoughts.

There was no one to run to. He was facing himself now. No more cover-up, no deceit. Life or death, that was the choice. No compromise. Life or death, but decide *now*. Not tomorrow, not next week, not in five minutes—

He knew the answer then, the flaw, the one thing that even Paul hadn't known. That life is too dear, that a man loves life—not what he can *do* with life, but very life itself for its own sake—too much to die. It was no choice, not really. A man will *always* choose life, as long as the choice is really his. Dan Fowler knew that now.

It would be selling himself—like Peter Golden did. It would betray Carl, and Jean, and all the rest. It would mean derision, and scorn, and oblivion for Dan Fowler.

Carl Golden was standing by the bed when he reached out his arm for the telephone. The squeaking of a valve—what? Carl's hand, infinitely gentle, on his chest, bringing up the soft blankets, and his good clean oxygen dwindling, dwindling—

Carl!

How did you know?

She came in the room as he was reopening the valve on the oxygen tank. She stared at Dan, grey on the bed, and then at Carl. One look at Carl's face and she knew too.

Carl nodded, slowly. "I'm sorry, Jean."

She shook her head, tears welling up. "But you loved him so."

"More than my own father."

"Then *why?*"

"He wanted to be immortal. Always, that drove him. Greatness, power—all the same. Now he will be immortal, because we needed a martyr in order to win. Now we will win. The other way we would surely lose, and he would live on and on, and die every day." He turned slowly to the bed and brought the sheet up gently. "This is better. This way he will never die."

They left the quiet room.

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a thing of custom

by...L. SPRAGUE de CAMP

"What are they like? Something like octopi, or perhaps centipedes.. Hm.. They don't sound pretty. Do they talk?"

RAJENDRA JAIPAL, liason officer of the Terran Delegation to the Associated Planets, said fluently but with a strong Hindustani accent: "P a r s o n to parson, please... I wish to speak to Milan Reid, at Parthia 6-0711, P a r t h i a, Pennsylvania... That is right."

While he waited, Jaipal looked at the telephone as if it were a noxious vine that had invaded his garden. An unreconstructed antimechanist, he regarded most features of the Western world with a dour, gloomy, and suspicious air.

"Here's your party," said the telephone.

Jaipal said: "Hello, Milan? This is R. J. How are you?... Oh, no warse than usual. Millions of calls to make and letters to write and hands to shake. Ugh! Now, listen. The railroad has given us two special sleepers and a baggage-car through from New Haven to Philadelphia. We shall put the delegates aboard Friday evening, and a train will

From time to time, these days, United Nations delegates or members of the Secretariat descend on sleepy New England or Pennsylvania towns that are not used to seeing exotically dressed ladies and even more exotically bearded gentlemen, standing next to them in the local Super Market or enjoying (unless good Muslims) the country ham and potato salad served at Home Coming Day. Project yourself into a not too distant future, when the delegates will be Koslovians and Oshidans, slightly startling in appearance perhaps, but equally interested in learning all that is to be learned during one short weekend about this bewildering but rather wonderful country of ours and its customs.

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pick these cars up and drop them off at Thirtieth Street at seven-thirty Saturday morning. Have you got that? Seven-thirty a.m., daylight saving. Write it down, please. You will have your people there to pick them up. The baggage-car will contain the Forellians, as they are too large for a sleeper. You will have a truck at the station for them. How are things doing at your end?"

A plaintive voice said: "Mrs. Kress got sick, so as vice-chairman of the Hospitality Committee I have to—to do all the work, rush around and check up and pump hands. I wish I'd known what I was getting into."

"If you think you have something to complain about, you should have my job. Have you got that letter with the list of delegates?"

"Yes... Um... Right here."

"Well, cross off the Moorians and the Koslovians, but add one more Oshidan."

"What's his name?"

"Zla-bzam Ksan-rdup."

"How do you spell it?"

Jaipal spelled. "Got it?"

"Uh-huh. You—you'll stay with us, of course?"

"Sorree, but I can't come."

"Oh, dear! Louise and I were counting on it." The voice was pained. Jaipal had met the Reids a year before when a similar week-end visit had been arranged with families of Ardmore. Jaipal and Reid were drawn together at once by a common dislike of the rest of the world.

"So was I," said Jaipal, "but a ship from Sirius is due Saturday. Now, there is one couple I want you to assign to yourself."

"Who?"

"The Osmanians."

There was a rustle of paper as Reid consulted his list. "Mr. and Mrs. Sterga?"

"Yes, or Sterga and Thvi. No children."

"What are they like?"

"Something like octopi, or perhaps centipedes."

"Hm. They don't sound pretty. Do they talk?"

"Better than we do. They have a—what do you call it?—a knick-knack for languages."

"Why do you want me to take them?"

"Because," explained Jaipal, "their planet has natural transuranic elements in quantity, and we are negotiating a mining-lease. It's veree delicate, and it wouldn't do for the Stergas to pfall into the wrong hands. Like—who was that uncouth buffoon I met at the Kresses'?"

"Charlie Ziegler?"

"That's the one." Jaipal snorted at the memory of Ziegler's tying a napkin around his head and putting on a burlesque swami-act. As Jaipal had no sense of humor, the other guests' roars at Ziegler's antics rubbed salt in the wound. He continued: "Those people would not do for hosts at all. I know

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you are tactful, not one of these stupid ethnocentrics who would act horrified or superior. Now, have you got the diet-lists?"

Mumble, mumble. "Yes, here's the list of those who can eat any human food, and those who can eat some human food, and those who can't eat any."

"The special pfood for the last group will be sent along on the train. Be sure it's delivered to the right houses."

"I'll have a couple of trucks at the station. You be sure each crate is clearly marked. But say, how—how about these Osmanians? I mean, what are they like aside from their looks?"

"Oh, quite jolly and convivial. High-spirited. They eat anything. You won't have any trouble." Jaipal could have told more about the Osmanians but forebore for fear of scaring Reid off. "Now, be sure not to send the Chavantians to anybody with a phobia about snakes. Remember that the Steinians eat in seclusion and consider any mention of food obscene. Be sure the Forellians go where there's an empty barn or garage to sleep in..."

"Louise!" called Milan Reid. "That was R. J. Can you help me with the lists now?"

Reid was a slight man who combined a weakness for aggressively stylish clothes with a shy, preoccupied, nervous, hurried air, all of which made him a natural target for the jeers of any gang of street-corner slopeheads. He was an engineer for the Hunter Bioresonator Corporation. He was a natural choice to manage the visiting extraterrestrials, being one who found foreigners easier to deal with than his own countrymen.

His wife entered, a slender woman of much his own type. They got to work on the list of delegates to the Associated Planets who were going to visit Parthia, and the lists of local families who would act as hosts. This was the third year of giving A. P. personnel an informal weekend in Terran homes. These three visits had all been to American homes because the A. P. headquarters was in New Haven. The success of the project, however, had made other nations demand that they, too, be allowed to show what nice people they were. Hence Athens, Grece, was the tentative choice for next year.

Milan Reid said: "...the Robertsonians have no sense of time, so we'd better give them to the Hobarts. They haven't any either."

"Then none of them will arrive for anything," said Louise Reid.

"So what? How about the Mendezians? Jaipal's note says they can't bear to be touched."

"Rajendra can't either,

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though he tries to be polite about it. Some Hindu tabu."

"Uh-huh. Let's see, aren't Goldthorpes fanatics on sanitation?"

"Just the people! They wouldn't want to touch the Mendezians either. Their children have to wash their hands every time they handle money, and Beatrice Goldthorpe puts on rubber gloves to read a book from the public library for fear of germs."

"How about the Oshidans?" he asked.

"What are they like, darling?"

"R. J. says they're the most formal race in the Galaxy, with the most elaborate etiquette. As he puts it here, 'they are what you call puffed shirts, only they don't wear shirts.'"

"I didn't know Rajendra could make much of a joke," said Louise Reid. "How about Dr. McClintock? He's another puffed shirt."

"Darling, you're wonderful. The Reverend John R. McClintock shall have them."

"How about the Zieglers? Connie Ziegler called to remind us they'd applied well in advance."

Reid scowled. "I'm going to juggle this list to put the Zielglers too far down to get any e. t.'s."

"Please don't do that, sweetheart. I know you don't like them, but living next door we have to get along."

"But R. J. said he didn't want the Zieglers as hosts."

"Oh, dear! If they ever find out we cheated them out of their guests..."

"Can't ebe helped. R. J.'s right, too. They're—they're typical ethnocentrics. I've squirmed in embarrassment while Charlie told bad jokes about our own minority groups here, feeling I ought to stop him but not knowing how. Can't you just see Charlie calling some sensitive extraterrestrial a bug in that loud Chicago bray of his?"

"But they did go out of their way to get on the list..."

"It's not that they like e.t.'s; they just can't bear to be left out."

"Oh, well, if we must... Who's next?" she asked.

"That's all, unless R. J. calls up again. Now, what shall we do with Sterga and Thvi?"

"I suppose we can put them in George's room. What do they enjoy?"

"It says here they like parties, sight-seeing, and swimming."

"We can take them to the pool."

"Sure. And since they're arriving early, we could drive 'em home for breakfast and then out to Gettysburg for a picnic."

During the next few days, Parthia was convulsed

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by preparations for the exotic visitors. Merchants filled their windows with interplanetary exhibits: artwork from Robertsonia, a stuffed fhe:gb from Schlemmeria, a photomontage of scenes on Flahertia.

At the Lower Siddim High School, performers at the forthcoming celebration rehearsed on the stage while volunteers readied the basement for the strawberry festival. Mrs. Carmichael, chairman of the Steering Committee, swept about supervising:

"...Where's that wretched man who was going to fix the public address system?... No, the color-guard mustn't carry rifles. We're trying to show these creatures how peaceful we are..."

The Quaker rolled into Thirtieth Street. The hosts from Parthia clustered about the three rearmost cars at the north end of the platform. While the trainmen uncoupled these cars, the doors opened and out came a couple of earthmen. After them came the extraterrestrials.

Milan Reid strode forward to greet the taller earthman. "I'm Reid."

"How d'you do; I'm Grove-Sparrow and this is Ming, We're from the Secretariat. Are your people ready?"

"Here they are."

"Hm." Grove-Sparrow looked at the milling mass of hosts, mostly suburban housewives. At that instant the Chavantians slithered off the train. Mrs. Ross gave a thin scream and fainted. Mr. Nagle caught her in time to keep her from cracking her skull on the concrete.

"Pay no attention," said Reid, wishing that Mrs. Ross had fallen on the tracks and been run over. "Which of our guests is which?"

"Those are the Oshidans, the ones with faces like camels."

"Dr. McClintock!" called Reid. "Here's your party."

"You take it, Ming," said Grove-Sparrow. Ming began a long winded formal introduction, during which the Oshidans and the Reverend McClintock kept up a series of low bows as if they were worked out by strings. Grove-Sparrow indicated three large things getting off the baggage-car. They were something like walruses and something like caterpillars, but two were as big as small elephants. The third was smaller. "The Forellians."

"Mrs. Meyer!" shouted Reid. "Is the truck ready?"

"The Robertsonians." Grove-Sparrow referred to four badger-like creatures with respirators on their long noses.

Reid raised his voice: "Hobart! No, their hosts aren't here yet."

"Let them sit on their kit; they won't mind," said Grove-

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Sparrow. "Here come the Osmanians."

"They-uh-they're mine." said Reid, his voice raising to a squeak of dismay. A group of gawkers had collected farther south on the platform teo stare at the extraterrestrials. None came close.

The Osmanians (so called because their planet was discovered by a Dr. Mahmud Osman) were built something on the lines of saw-horses. Instead of four legs, they had twelve rubbery tentacles, six in a row on each side, on which they scuttled briskly along. They were much alike fore and aft, but one could tell their front end by the two large froglike eyes on top and the mouth-opening between the foremost pair of tentacles.

"You are our host?" said the leading Osmanian in a blubbery voice. "Ah, such a pleasure, good dear Mr. Reid!"

The Osmanian flung itself upon Reid, rearing up on its six after tentacles to enfold him in its six forward ones. It pressed a damp kiss on his cheek. Before he could free himself from this gruesome embrace, the second Osmanian swarmed up on him and kissed his other cheek. As the creatures weighed over two hundred pounds apiece, Reid staggered and sank to the concrete, enveloped in tentacles.

The Osmanians released their host. Grove-Sparrow helped Reid to his feet, saying in a low voice:

"Don't look so bloody horrified, old boy. They're only trying to be friendly."

"I forget," blubbered the larger Osmanian. "Your method of greeting here is to shake the anterior limb, is it not?" It extended a tentacle.

Reid gingerly put out a hand. The Osmanian caught the hand with three tentacles and pumped Reid's arm so vigorously that he was nearly jerked off his feet.

"Let's dance!" cried the Osmanian, slithering around in a circle and swinging Reid opposite him. "Guk-guk-guk!" This last was a horrid coughing, cackling sound that served the Osmanians for laughter.

"No, no, Sterga!" said Grove-Sparrow. "Let him go! He has to sort out the delegations."

"Oh, all right," said Sterga. "Maybe somebody would like to wrestle. You, madam?" The Osmanian addressed Mrs. Meyer, who was fat and of mature years.

"No, please," said Mrs. Meyer, paling and dodging behind Grove-Sparrow. "I—I have to see to the Forellians."

"Quiet down, you two," said Grove-Sparrow. "You'll get exercise later."

"I hope so," said Sterga. "Perhaps Mr. Reid will wres-

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tle with us at his home, gukguk. It is the main sport of Nohp." This was the name of Osmania in Sterga's language. The Osmanian spoke to his mate in this tongue while Reid frantically paired off guests and hosts. The rest of the Quaker rumbled off.

When each set of guests had been sent off with its host, and the Forellians had crawled up on to their truck-trailer, the four little Robertsonians were left sitting on the platform. There was still no sign of the Hobarts. The employees of the railroad wheeled crates out of the baggage-car, marked FOOD FOR FORELLIANS, FOOD FOR STEINIANS, and so forth. Reid said to Grove-Sparrow:

"Look, I—I've got to find my truck-drivers and give them these addresses. Will you keep an eye on the Osmanians and Robertsonians till I get back?"

"Righto."

REID dashed off, followed by two porters pushing a hand-truck piled with crates. When he returned, the Robertsonians were still sitting in a disconsolate circle. There was no sign of Grove-Sparrow, Ming, the Hobarts, or the Osmanians. There was broken glass on the concrete, a smear of liquid, and an alcoholic smell.

As he stared about wildly, Reid felt a tug at his trouser-leg. A Robertsonian said: "Please, is dere any sign of our host?"

"No, but he'll be along. What's happened to the others?"

"Oh, dat. Dey were lying on de platform, waiting, when an eart'man came along, walking dis way and dat as if he were sick. He saw Mr. Ming and said sometting about dirty foreigners. Mr. Ming pretended he didn't hear, and de man said he could lick anybody in de place. I suppose he meant dat custom you call kissing, dough he didn't look as if he loved anybody."

"What *happened?*"

"Oh, de Osmanians got up, and Sterga said: 'Dis nice fellow wants to wrestle. Come on, Thvi.'

"He started for de man, who saw him for de first time. De man took a bottle out of his pocket and trew it at Sterga, saying: 'Go back to hell where you belong!' De bottle broke. De man ran. Sterga and Thvi ran after him, calling to him to stop and wrestle. Mr. Grove-Sparrow and Mr. Ming ran after. Dat's all. Now please, can you find de people who are going to take us?"

Reid sighed. "I'll have to find the others first. Wait here..."

He met the missing members of the expedition returning to the platform. "The drunk is on his way to the police-station," said Grove-Sparrow. "Still no sign of your Hobarts?"

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"Not yet, but that's not unusual."

"Why don't you take the Robertsonians to the Hobart place?"

"We'd probably pass the Hobarts on their way here. Tell you, though; I'll 'phone to see if they've left."

The Hobart telephone answered. Clara Hobart said: "Oh, Milan! We were just ready to go. I'm sorry we're late, but you know how it is."

Reid, resisting an impulse to grind his teeth, did indeed know how it was with the Hobarts. They had a way of arriving at parties just as everybody else was leaving. "Stay where you are and I'll deliver your guests in about an hour."

He went back and bid goodbye to Grove-Sparrow and Ming, who were returning to New Haven. Then he herded his two groups of extra-terrestrials up the ramps to his car.

To a man who hated to be made conspicuous, the drive to Parthia left much to be desired. The Robertsonians curled up in one large furry ball on the front seat and slept, but the Osmanians bounced around in back, excited and garrulous, pointing with their tentacles and sticking them out the windows to wave at passers-by. Most people had read about extraterrestrials and seen them on television enough not to be unduly surprised, but an octopoid tentacle thrust in the window of your car while you are waiting for a light can still be startling.

After the Osmanians had almost caused a collision, Reid ordered them sternly to keep their tentacles inside the car. He envied Nagle and Kress, who had flown their guests home from the roof of the Post Office Building in their private helicopters.

WEST OF the Susquehanna, the Piedmont Expressway turns south towards Westminster, to swoop past Baltimore and Washington. Milan Reid turned off and continued west. In response to his pleas, the Osmanians had been fairly quiet.

Near York he found himself stuck behind an Amishman's buggy, which the heavy eastbound traffic kept him from passing.

"What is that?" asked Thvi.

"A buggy," said Louise Reid.

"Which, the thing with the wheels or the animal pulling it?"

"The thing with the wheels. The animal is called a horse."

"Isn't that a primitive form of transportation here?" said Sterga.

"Yes," said Louise. "The man uses it because of his religion."

"Is that why he wears that round black hat?"

"Yes."

"I want that hat," said Ster-

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ga. "I think I should look pretty in it, guk-guk-guk."

Reid glanced around. "If you want a Terran hat you'll have to buy one. That hat belongs to the man."

"I still want it. If Terra is going to get this mining-lease, it can afford me that one little hat."

The eastbound traffic ceased for the moment. Reid passed the buggy. As the automobile came abreast, Sterga thrust his front end out the quadrant-window. A tentacle whisked the black hat from the head of the Amishman.

The sectarian's broad ruddy chin-whiskered face turned towards the car. His blue eyes popped with horror. He gave a hoarse scream, leaped from the buggy, vaulted a split-rail fence, and ran off across a field. As the car drew ahead of the buggy, the horse had a view of Sterga too. The horse shrieked and ran off in the other direction, the buggy bouncing wildly behind it.

Reid braked to a stop. "Damn it!" he yelled.

In the back seat, Sterga was trying to balance the Amishman's hat on his head, if he could be said to have a head. Reid snatched the hat. "What kind of trouble are you trying to make?"

"No trouble; just a little joke," bubbled Sterga.

Reid snorted and got out. The Amishman had disappeared. His horse was in sight across a plowed field, eating grass. It was still attached to the buggy. Reid crossed the road, holding the hat, and started across the field. His feet sank into the soft earth, and the soil entered his shoes. The horse heard him coming, looked around, and trotted off.

After several tries, Reid plodded back to his automobile, hung the hat on a fence-post, shook the dirt out of his shoes, and drove off. Fuming, he promised Rajendra Jaipal some hard words.

The Osmanians were subdued for a while. At Gettysburg they went into the exhibition-building. From the gallery they looked down upon a relief-map of the Gettysburg region covered with colored electric lights. A phonograph-record gave an account of the battle while a young man worked a set of keys that lit the lights to show the positions of the Federal and Confederate troops at various times:

"Now, at the beginning of the second day, Longstreet spent the morning ranging his artillery around the salient where the Third Corps occupied the peach orchard." (Lights blinked on.) "At noon the Confederates began a bombardment, and McLaws' Division advanced. . ."

There was a stir among the spectators as the Osmanians wormed their way into the front row and hung their tentacles over the rail. The young man working the lights lost track of his keys and sat

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gaping while the recording ground on. Then he tried to catch up, became confused, and for a time had Meade's Federals in full retreat.

Reid led his guests outside. They climbed the observation-tower, from which they saw the Round Tops and the Eisenhower Memorial rising from the farm which that President had owned. When Reid and his wife started down, Sterga blubbered something at Thvi. The next thing, the Osmanians were scrambling down the outside of the steelwork.

"Come back! You'll be killed!" yelled Reid, who hated high places.

"No danger," called back Sterga. "This is more fun."

The Reids clattered down the stairs. Reid expected to hear the plop of an Osmanian striking the concrete. He got to the bottom just ahead of the Osmanians, who slid from girder to girder with the greatest ease.

Milan Reid sat down on the bottom step and pressed his fists against his head. Then he said in a hollow voice: "Let's eat lunch."

AT THE Rose Hill Swimming Pool, Wallace Richards, the lifeguard, was showing off his dives. He was a young man of vast thews and vaster vanity. Girls sat around the pool watching, while other young men, all looking either skinny or potbellied by contrast, gloomed in the background. The Forellians had swum in the morning but now had gone away. While they were there, there had been no room for anybody else in the pool. Now there were no extraterrestrials until Milan and Louise came out in bathing-suits, followed by Sterga and Thvi. Reid spread a blanket and prepared to settle down to a sun-bath.

The Osmanians aroused the usual stir. Wallace Richards never noticed. He stood tautly, tapering from shoulders to ankles like an inverted isosceles triangle, while he gathered his forces for a triple flip.

Thvi slipped into the pool and shot across it with a swirl of tentacles. Richards bounded off the board, clasped his knees, turned over three times, and straightened out. He came down on top of Thvi.

Sterga shouted in his own language, but too late. Then he too entered the water. The watchers cried out.

The surface of the pool was beaten by thrashing limbs and tentacles. Richards' head appeared, shouting:

"Damn it, give me back my trunks!"

The Osmanians whipped across the pool and shot out. Thvi waved Richards' trunks (little more than a G-string) in one tentacle and called: "You will jump on top of me, will you?"

"I didn't do it on purpose!"

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screamed Richards. The audience began to laugh.

"Knocked all the breath out of me, guk-guk-guk," bubbled Thvi, trying to work a couple of her tentacles through the leg holes.

Sterga scrambled up the ladder to the high-diving board. "Earthman!" he called down. "How did you do that jump?"

"Give me back my trunks!"

"Like this?" Sterga leaped off the board.

However, instead of diving, he spread all twelve tentacles and came down on Richards like a pouncing spider. Richards ducked before the hideous apparition descended on him and began to swim away. But his speed in the water was as nought compared to the Osmanian's. Sterga caught him and began tickling him.

Reid said to Thvi: "For God's sake, make that mate of yours let the man go. He'll drown him."

"Oh, all right. You Earthmen never want any fun." Thvi swam over to where the pair were struggling.

A limp Richards was hauled out and laid on the concrete. Somebody pumped his lungs for ten minutes until he came around and sat up, coughing and gasping. When he pulled himself together he glared about and wheezed: "Where are those God-damned octopussies? I'll..."

But Reid and his charges had left.

FOR COCKTAILS, the Reids had an older couple in: Professor and Mrs. Hamilton Beach, of Bryn Mawr College. Beach, a sociologist, wanted to talk about such serious matters as interspecies relations, but Sterga and Thvi had other ideas. They swallowed their cocktails so fast that Reid could do little but mix new ones. They made horrible noises which, they explained, were an Osmanian song.

Reid worried lest they get drunk and become even more obstreperous, but Sterga reassured him: "These are nothing to what we drink on Nohp. There anything less than four-fifths alcohol is a—how would you say it—a light-wines-and-beer."

The Reids eased the Beaches out at seven so as to have time to eat and get to the strawberry festival. Reid went back into the living-room to find Sterga and Thvi drinking alternately out of the shaker. Sterga said:

"Mr. Reid, I understand you people have the same reproductive methods we have."

"Uh—well—that depends on your method," said Reid, appalled by the turn of the conversation.

"You do reproduce bisexually, don't you? The male carries..."

"Yes, yes, yes."

"Why haven't you and Mrs.

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Reid done so."

Reid bit his lip. "We have. Our son is away at camp, as a counsellor."

"Ah, that is fine. Then you can comply with the custom of the Hliht."

"What custom?"

"We always trade mates with our guests. It is inhospitable not to."

"What?"

Sterga repeated.

Reid goggled. "You—you're not serious?"

"Certainly. It will be—"

"But that's physically impossible, even if our customs allowed it."

"No, we are not so different as you might think. I have investigated the matter. Anyway, we can have a lot of fun experimenting, guk-guk."

"Out of the question!" snapped Reid. "Our customs forbid it."

"You Earthmen want that mining-lease, don't you? Well then?"

"Excuse me," said Reid, and went into the kitchen. There Louise was helping the temporary maid to put the final touches on the dinner. He drew her aside and explained the latest demand of their guests.

Louise Reid goggled in her turn. She opened the door to get a glimpse of Sterga in the living-room. Sterga caught her eye and winked. This was an unnerving spectacle, as the Osmanians blinked their eyes by withdrawing them into their heads and popping them up again.

SHE TURNED away and pressed her hands over her face. "What shall we *do*."

"Well, I—I can tell you one thing. I'm going to get rid of these so-called guests. If I ever catch R. J. . . ."

"But what about the mining-concession?"

"To hell with the mining-concession. I don't care if it causes an interplanetary war; I won't put up with these rubber jokers any longer. I hate the sight of them

"But how? You can't just push them out the front door to wander the streets!"

"Let me think." Reid glanced out the window to make sure the Zieglers' lights were on. "I know; we'll give them to the Zieglers! It'll serve both of them right."

"Oh, darling, do you think we ought? After all. . . ."

"I don't care if we ought or not. First you'll get a wire that your mother is sick and you have to pack and leave for Washington tonight... Start serving; I'll set the wheels in motion."

Reid went to the telephone and called his friend Joe Farris. "Joe?" he said in a low voice. "Will you ring me back in fifteen minutes? Then don't pay any attention to what I say; it's to get me out of a jam."

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Fifteen minutes later, the telephone rang. Reid answered it and pretended to repeat a telegraphic message. Then he came into the dining-room and said sadly:

"Bad news, sweetheart. Your mother is sick again, and you'll have to go to Washington tonight." He turned to Sterga. "I'm sorry, but Mrs. Reid has to leave."

"Oh!" said Thvi. "We were so looking forward—"

"Now, I can't be properly hospitable by myself," continued Reid. "But I'll find you another host."

"But you are such a fine host—" protested Sterga.

"Thanks, I really can't. Everything will be all right, though. Finish your dinner while I make arrangements. Then we'll go to the festival together."

He slipped out and walked to the Zieglers' house next door. Charles Ziegler, wiping his mouth, answered the bell. He was stout and balding, with thick hairy forearms. He wrung Reid's hand in a crushing grip and bellowed: "Hey there, Milan old boy! Whatcha doing these days? We ought to get together more often, hey? Come on in."

Reid forced a smile. "Well, Charlie, it's like this. I—I'm in a predicament, but with a little help from you we can fix it up to please everybody. You wanted A. P. guests on this visit, didn't you?"

Ziegler shrugged. "Connie felt she had to get into the act, and I guess I could have put up with a houseful of lizard-men to please her. Why, whatcha got in mind?"

Reid told of his mother-in-law's illness as if it were real. "So I thought you could come to the celebration and pick up my Osmanians..."

Ziegler slapped Reid on the back. "Sure, Milan old boy, I'll take care of your double-ended squids. I'll fill 'em full of G-bombs." This was a lethal gin-drink of Ziegler's own concoction. "Hey, Connie!"

AT THE strawberry-festival, people and extraterrestrials stood in a line that wound past a counter. There they were served strawberry ice-cream, cake, and coffee, cafeteria-style. Strips of colored paper festooned the ceiling; planetary flags draped the walls. Some guests, either because they could not eat Terran food or because they were not built for standing in line with trays, made other arrangements. The Forellians occupied one whole corner of the basement with their hosts fed them special provender with shovels.

The extraterrestrials were identified by tags pinned to the clothes of those species who wore them, or hung around their necks otherwise. As the Osmanians had neither clothes nor necks, the tags

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were fastened to straps tied around their middles, with the tags uppermost like the brass plates on dog-collars.

Reid found himself opposite a Chavantian coiled up on a chair. The Chavantian reared up the front yard of its body and daintily manipulated its food with the four appendages that grew from the sides of its neck.

"I," squeaked the Chavantian, "am fascinated by the works of your Shakespeare. Such insight! Such feeling! I taught Terran literature, you know, before I entered the diplomatic service."

"So?" said Reid. "I used to teach, too." He had become a high-school mathematics-teacher under the mistaken belief that teaching was an occupation for timid, ineffectual people who feared to face the world. He soon learned that it called for brawn and brutality far beyond anything demanded by the business world. "Have you been well treated so far?"

"Oh, we are sometimes made aware of our unfortunate resemblance to an order of Terran life towards whom most of you do not feel very friendly." (Reid knew the Chavantian meant snakes.) "But we make allowances."

"How about the other guests?" Reid craned his neck to see who was present. The Hobarts and their Robert sonians had not arrived.

"All fine. The Steinians are of course not here, as this would be a revolting spectacle to them. 'Just a thing of custom: 'tis no other; only it spoils the pleasure of the time.'"

The Reids and their guests finished eating and went up to the auditorium, which was already half full. The young of several species had rubber balloons, each balloon straining gently upward on its string. They made so thick a cloud that those in the rear found their view of the stage obscured.

The program opened with a concert by the high-school band. Then the local Boy Scout troop presented colors. The Reverend McClintock officially welcomed the guests and introduced them, one by one. As they were introduced, those who could, stood up and were applauded.

Then followed songs by a local choral society; dances by a square-dancing club; more songs; American Indian dances by a cubscout pack; awards of prizes to Associated Planets essay-contest winners...

The trouble with amateur shows of this sort is not that the acts are bad. Sometimes they are quite good. The real difficulty is that each performer wants to give his all. This means he wants to put on all the pieces in his reper-

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tory. As a result, each act is twice as long as it should be. And, because the contributors are unpaid volunteers, the manager can't insist on drastic cuts. If he does, they get hurt and pull out altogether.

The show was still grinding on at ten-thirty. Balloons, escaped from their owners, swayed gently against the ceiling. The young Forellian snored like a distant thunderstorm at the back of the hall. The young of several other species, including *Homo sapiens*, got out of hand and had to be taken away. The Osmanians fidgeted on seats never designed for their kind and twiddled their tentacles.

Milan Reid ostentatiously looked at his watch and whispered to Sterga: "I have to take my wife to the train. Good-night. Good-night, Thvi."

He shook their tentacles, led Louise out, and drove off. He did not, however, drive to the railroad station or the airport. He did not think that the situation called for Louise's actually going to Washington. Instead, he left her at the apartment of one of her girl-friends in Merion. Then he went home.

FIRST he went up to the Zieglers' front door. He put out his thumb to ring, to make sure his plans had gone through. Then he drew back. From within came screams of laughter: Connie's shrill peals, Charlie's belly-roars, and the Osmanians' hideous cackle.

His guests had obviously made contact with their new hosts. There was no need for him to go in. If he did, Charlie would insist on his joining the party, and he loathed raucous parties.

Reid went to his own house and got ready for bed. Though not much of a late-evening drinker, he mixed himself a strong eye-and-soda, turned on the radio to a good-music station, lit his pipe, and relaxed. From next door, outbursts of crazy laughter rose up from time to time, with odd thumping sounds and once the crash of breaking glass. Reid smiled quietly.

The telephone rang. Reid frowned and lifted the handset.

"New Haven calling," said the operator. Then came the nasal tones of Rajendra Jaipal: Hello, Milan? This is R. J. I didn't know if you would be home yet from the celebration. How are your guests?"

"I got rid of them," said Reid.

"You *what?*"

"Got rid of them. Gave them away. I couldn't stand them."

"Where are they now?" Jaipal's voice rose tautly.

"Next door, at the Zieglers'. They seem—"

"Oh, you did *not!*"

"Damn right I did. They

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seem to be having a high old time."

"*Ai Ram Ram!* I thought I could trust you! You have upset interplanetary relations for centuries! My God, why did you do that? And why the Zieglers, of all people?"

"Because the Zieglers were handy, and because these squids are a pair of spoiled brats; impulsive, irresponsible children, with no manners, no morals, no sense, no nothing. If—"

"That does not matter. You have your dutee to humanity."

"My duty doesn't include trading wives with a space-octopus—"

"Oh, you could have found a way around that—"

"And why—why didn't you warn me of their cute little ways? My day has been pure hell."

Jaipal's voice rose to a scream. "You selfish, perpidious materialist—"

"Oh, go jump in the lake! You're the perfidious one, palming these interstellar zanies off on me. I suppose you neglected to tell me what I was getting into for fear I'd back out, huh? Well, didn't you? Didn't you?"

The telephone was silent. Then Jaipal said in a lower voice: "My dear friend, I admit that I too am a sinful, imparfect mortal. Please forgive my hasty remarks. But now let us see if we can repair the damage. This is most serious. The economic future of our planet depends on this mining-lease. I shall ply down at once."

"It won't do you any good to get here before seven. I'm going to bed, and I won't even answer the doorbell till then."

"Then I shall be on your doorstep at seven. Good-bye."

WHEN REID looked out next morning, there was Rajendra Jaipal in a gray-flannel suit sitting on his doorstep. As the door opened, Jaipal's gaunt, somber figure arose. "Well, are you readee to show me the wreckage of mankind's hopes?"

Reid looked across at the Zieglers' house, where all was silent. "I think they're still asleep. Uh—have you had breakfast?"

"No, but—"

"Then come in and have some."

They ate in gloomy silence. Since awakening, Reid had begun to worry. In morning's cold light, his bold stroke of last night no longer seemed so dashing. In fact it might prove a colossal blunder. Of course one couldn't submit one's wife to an extraterrestrial's amatory experiments. (Or could one, for the sake of one's planet?) In any case, he could surely have gotten around that. He could have

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sent Louise away but himself put up with the Osmanians for a few more hours. It was his cursed lack of social skill again. Why did the fate of planets depend on a wretched caricature of a man like him?

It was after nine of a bright sunshiny day when Reid and Jaipal approached the Ziegler house. Reid rang. After a while the door opened. There stood Charles Ziegler, wearing a pair of purple-and-white checkered shorts. For an instant he glowered through bloodshot eyes. Then he grinned.

"Hel-lo there!" he cried. "Come on in!"

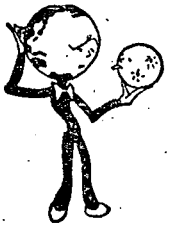
Reid introduced Jaipal and went in. The living-room was a shambles. Here lay an overthrown floor-lamp; there a card-table with a broken leg teetered drunkenly. Cards and poker-chips bespangled the floor.

From the kitchen came sound of breakfast-making. Sterga slithered in, balancing an ice-bag on his head with two tentacles, and said. "Such a night! My dear Mr. Reid, how can I thank you enough for finding such a congenial host? I did not think any being in the Galaexy could drink me down, guk-guk!"

Reid looked questioningly at Ziegler, who said: "Yeah, we sure hung one on."

"It meant we could not carry out the experiment as I hoped," said Sterga. "But that is all right. Next year, even if the rest go to Athens, Thvi and I will come here to the Zieglers'." The Osmanian reared up and clutched Ziegler's neck, while Ziegler patted the rubbery hide. "We love them. He is a good wrestler, too. And don't worry about your mining-lease, R. J. There will be no difficulty."

Reid and Jaipal excused themelves. Outside, they looked at each other, Each made the same gesture, raising his shoulder while spreading his hands with the palms up. Then they saluted each other with a wave of the hand, while their faces expressed despairing incomprehension. Reid turned back to his house, and Jaipal walked swiftly away.



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eye of the beholder

by . . . JOHN BRUNNER

The man who painted that was one of the great artists of all time, she thought. Maybe the very greatest.

THE peak jutted up from the scorched range like a blood-stained fang, and its colour was indescribable. Painter knew that rose and vermilion and scarlet and crimson all entered into the total effect, for he had climbed all over it to see. It had taken him many days to survey the whole area, but he did not begrudge the time expended. He knew now precisely how he might duplicate the effect.

He was placing the first layer of pigment when the ship went past.

The movement had caught his attention a fraction before the scream of riven air came down to him, and he was quick enough to catch a glimpse of it before it dropped below the horizon. His first thought—as was natural to him—was to remark how magnificently the white vapour trail, tinted to blush-pink by the fury of the exhausts, stood out against the almost unbearable steel-blue of the sky, and to fix the impression in his mind to be reproduced at leisure.

But what makes a painter? John Brunner, distinguished British SF writer, turns the spotlight on the resistance of the best of us to grant the possibility that others than we thoroughly normal people can sense the beauty and almost glow with and in the warmth of the desert at sunset—here or on Planet X. A deceptively simple story—told by a master craftsman, who will make you wonder what you would do....

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His second was to wonder where it came from. There were no scheduled vessels visiting this world, he was certain, which left one alternative: the pilot was making an emergency landing.

In which case, he might be able to help.

The passing regret at having to postpone the completion of his picture was negligible; he had an almost perfectly trained visual memory, and the colour effects of this mountain range were unlikely to be forgotten in a hurry.

He was quite a way from his ship, of course—he was almost at the outward end of his trek—and it would take him a full rotation of the planet to get there and back. But if the stranger was in control of his ship, he would have put it down where Painter had put his down, for the excellent reason that it was the only decently flat and solid piece of ground on the planet. In fact, he remembered, the line of flight of the ship had been in that direction.

There was no point in picking up his equipment—it would come to no harm where it was, and he would travel faster for the reduction of weight. Painter—that was his name as well as his occupation—gave a final glance around to make sure he had left nothing to be blown away, and started with lengthy strides towards his base.

AS the ship dipped into atmosphere, Froude was blaming Takamura and Takamura was blaming the mechanics at their last port of call. Christy, of course, being a woman, was blaming both of them, and probably with justification.

Tak shot a quick glance at her when he could safely take his mind off the controls for a mile or two, and wondered how long this expensive and delicate female was going to stay married to Froude. A short stay on the third planet of a B-type star would certainly do nothing to ease their tempers.

Froude was still shouting at him, he noticed, and he broke in with a weary shrug. "All right!" he said. "You hired me to fly the ship, remember, not to service it! We can't settle anything by quarreling now, and if you don't let up, I won't be able to concentrate on the controls."

He had told Froude when the man hired him that he could put a ship down with an Alpheratzan leg-show running on the exterior view-screen, but Christy seemed suddenly to wake up to the fact that their survival depended on the skill and judgement of Tak. She dropped into a chair and

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spoke in a more reasonable voice than either of the men.

"Tak's right, dear," she told Froude. "Time enough to argue when we're out of this mess."

"Did you think to turn on the emergency distress call?" said Froude, suddenly thinking of it. Tak gave him a sour nod.

"It's been on for over an hour," he said. "Since we first fell out of hyperspace."

"And how long will it take them to get to us?" Christy wanted to know.

Tak shook his head. "Five days—a week. Something like that. Unless they have the stress characteristics of this area on record, which is doubtful. No one's interested in visiting planets as hot as this bunch here."

Air whispered outside.

"You mean we may have to spend a *week* down there?" Christy sounded appalled; she was gazing at the furnace-mouth surface of the world as it streaked past below them. "Why, there's nothing but rocks and sand!"

"I know." Tak was studying the radar profilometer with a frown; it seemed that the average angle of the surface was about fifteen degrees from vertical.

Froude had noticed the fact, too; he quit biting his nails in the corner of the cabin—thinking the same way as I was about Christy's reactions, Tak commented to himself—and came over to watch the wriggling line on the scanner. "You can't be going to try and land in that!" he said.

"Well, we can't spend a week just going round and round," said Tak ill-temperedly. "There's some oxygen in those rocks, and there ought to be a trace in the air, too, but if we stick in orbit we're going to find it damned difficult to breathe in another day or so.

"Look!" said Froude suddenly. "Over there!"

Tak saw it at almost the same instant: a patch of [illegible]ably flat ground four or five miles square, cut off amid toothed ridges of rock and lava. Whether he could put the ship down on it after being used to the twenty-mile runways of decent spaceports, he didn't know, but he would obviously have to find out.

"Quiet!" he ordered, giving a swift look back to see that Christy was going to keep out of the way. She was sitting with her face set in a grim mask, and Tak guessed Froude was going to hear something from her when the two were alone.

There was only one possible approach to the level spot, between sharp-edged hills four thousand feet high, but he managed to keep the ship well clear of them,

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and was on the point of congratulating himself when he saw a smooth rise in the ground ahead—a heap of sand round-backed by the wind like a stranded whale.

Gasping, he lifted the ship and cleared it by what he suspected was mere yards; then there was a slithering—

They were down.

He shut off the power and sat back, wiping his forehead unashamedly. The half-hope that one of the others would appreciate and remark on his achievement died as Christy got to her feet and walked deliberately over to a viewport, followed by the anxious gaze of her current husband.

She studied the landscape for some time. Then she turned and went to another port opposite. Only after that did she say anything, and then her voice was full of blistering contempt.

"This is a blood-stained place for a wedding trip!"

And they were at it again. Tak wished the ship were big enough for him to get out of earshot, but it had only been designed for the six or eight hour journeys between stars through hyperspace, and although there were stores kept aboard for events such as this, there was precious little else, and room was in shortest supply of all.

The quarrel died slowly; Christy had shouted herself hoarse, and crossed to the water-spigot to draw a drink. Tak's hand closed over the knob before she could press it down.

"Careful," he said flatly. "What we have has got to last us the week. I'm going to try and rig a distillation outfit, but I doubt if there's much water to be had here."

Christy looked at him for a few seconds as if she could hardly believe her ears; *hired space pilots don't talk to me like that!* He could practically hear the thought.

Then she seemed to sag a little. She turned away. "No water," she said flatly. And the words suddenly reminded them that it was getting hot in the cabin

"I'll go see if I can turn up the refrigeration," said Tak, and stepped over to the rear door guarding the power compartment. Christy made to duck back from the sweep of the radiation field, and he gave her a humourless grin.

"This close to a B-type sun," he said, "we're getting about double a safe rate already. I shouldn't let the little leak from the pile worry you."

There was none of the normal fear of a woman who has not born children in the expression on Christy's face, he noted. As he passed down the shaft towards the power compartment, he thought that if he had sized Christy up right, it was unlikely

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Froude and she would be in the classic hurry of newly-weds, and in the confined space of the cabin, that was as well. It would be inconvenience, not frustration, that worked on her mind—but there was no doubt that Froude saw clearly how much mere inconvenience might weigh with a woman so spoiled...

Tak turned the 'frig controls over to maximum. On the way back to the cabin, he paused and reached deep into his kitbag in the baggage storebox. His fingers found the hard efficient shape with no trouble at all—he believed in having it handy.

But, he thought as he looked at the squat bolt-gun in his palm, there were degrees of handiness, and if the situation called for it, he wanted this right in his pocket.

FROUDE was down in the ate tone.
head, though Tak presumed it was nerves that had driven him there more than anything else—he could think of no adequate physical reason under the circumstances. He had been wondering how much longer Christy could keep up her stubborn resistance.

Now it began to crack.

"Doesn't it ever get dark on this blood-stained world?" she demanded in a passion-

"About once in three days," said Tak flatly. "I checked the rotation period. We landed near dawn."

"So we sit here and fry till the sun goes down." Christy nodded. She started to rub her eyes, and then checked herself in mid-motion, dropping her hands to clench them in her lap.

Another point, thought Tak with surprise. So she was as scared of losing Froude as he of losing her—otherwise she wouldn't be going to so much trouble to preserve that impeccable—once—makeup. Maybe he had never seen her face without it; now, though—he looked closely—the signs were appearing: unable to wash herself, Christy had been patching it as best she could. There was an end to that process.

And it might not be a pleasant one.

Froude stepped back through the door into the cabin and shot a quick glance at Tak. *Not at Christy,* the pilot noted. Interesting—but nasty!

He was very glad of the weight of the bolt-gun in his side-pocket.

"Tak just told me we have to sit in here and bake until the sun goes down the day after tomorrow," said Christy, making an attempt at establishing contact with her husband again. Tak made no attempt to correct the state-

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ment, only waited for Froude's reaction.

It didn't come—or rather, it took the form of blank acceptance, as if their spirit were being drained out into the parching air along with the sweat of their skins. He put one hand on the edge of a viewport and stared out at the blindingly bright plain.

"What is that, anyway?" he said, gesturing at the round-backed hummock they had so nearly struck on the way down.

"Star knows," shrugged Tak. "A sand drift, maybe. You wouldn't expect to find much flat ground on a world like this anyway. We ought to be very glad it wasn't a ten-thousand-foot mountain."

"Don't say that to me!" blazed Froude, rounding on him; then, gathering himself with an effort, "I'm sorry, Tak. You didn't mean it."

Mean what? The pilot gave a non-committal grunt.

"Isn't there even a breeze?" said Christy desperately, and at the tone of her voice Tak looked up sharply. That was the edge of hysteria! He forced himself to reply matter-of-factly.

"Only near the terminator," he said. "After it's been under direct sun for some time, the ground is pretty well uniformly warmed. There are some pretty fierce gales, I expect, about dusk and dawn, when the surface is heated unequally."

And Christy's control broke; she finally rubbed her face, and the makeup flaked like plaster.

Froude was still staring at the round-backed hummock; it seemed to fascinate him. Tak made an urgent gesture to Christy, and she put her hand to her mouth in horror, got up, and made for the head to repair the damage.

Froude glanced round when he heard the door slide to, and relaxed thankfully, when he saw she was out of sight. He breathed a shuddering sigh. "She's standing it better than I ever thought she would," he said finally. "Oh, can't that rescue ship get a *move* on?"

Tak shook his head. "Deducing the stress pattern of this area will take some time, and they'll have to come in under light speed from some way out in case they hit the same flaw-complex we did. Then there'd be two of us to be collected."

"You seem very calm about all this," said Froude after a while. Tak shrugged.

"I've been stranded before—alone—once," he replied. "Having company makes it a little easier."

Froude's eyes narrowed, and he turned away. *Stars!* thought Tak in horror. *Have I said something as wrong as I think I have?*

At that point Christy came back, her face back to its mask-like perfection but set

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in a sullen and determined expression.

"I'm going to explode if I stay in this ship another moment!" she said. "I'm getting claustrophobia!"

"Go outside?" said Froude in startled disbelief. "Why?"

"There's nothing out there but rock and sand," put in Tak, equally astonished. "And—look, we only have one heat-proof suit."

"Well, there's only one of me, isn't there?" said Christy. "That's enough."

"But you can't go out there into—" Baffled, Tak came to a stop to find Froude's eyes on him.

"You're awfully concerned for my wife's safety all of a sudden, aren't you?" Froude said silkily. "Is it just that having company makes you stay more bearable? You'd hate to lose her, wouldn't you?"

Christy was having trouble following the trend of the speech; Tak didn't propose to enlighten her. He turned away.

"You think there may be monsters lurking out there to attack her?" Froude went on. "If you're so concerned, why don't you do something constructive. Like giving her that bolt-gun!"

Tak whirled. "How—"

"How did I know? I didn't. You just have something heavy in your pocket. If it is a gun, go on—give it to her!"

Safer with her than with him, Tak thought. Reluctantly, he unpocketed the weapon and handed it over, then showed her how to fasten the clumsy heatproof suit and how to operate its radio and power-assisted walking devices.

FOR fully a minute after the lock had closed behind her, Froude stood watching her march off across the level ground. At length, however, he turned to face the silent Tak.

"Don't be a fool!" said the pilot desperately, seeing the purpose in the other's eyes. "How the hell could there be anything like that? You haven't been out of sight for more than five minutes together—"

"If that's the way your mind's running," said Froude flatly, "you've told me all I wanted to know. That's why I made sure you hadn't got a gun to pull on me. Clever—wasn't it?"

Exactly as he finished the last word, his fist shot out. Tak was not quite fast enough to evade it; it caught him on the side of the head and knocked him staggering back against the wall. Helplessly, he shook his head, trying to clear it, and saw Froude moving purposefully in to finish the job.

The second blow was never launched.

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"Hey! Can you hear me?"

At the sound of Christy's voice from the wall speaker, Froude spun round, his face swiftly changing to an expression of horror. "Yes, we hear you!" he shouted, and then, giving a venomous glance at Tak, added more quietly, "If anything's happened to her—"

Tak didn't try to reason with him; the time was past when reason would help. Instead, he pushed himself groggily upright and crossed to the microphone.

"We hear you," he saw, his jaw working stiffly. "What is it?"

"Someone else has been here before us! I've found a sort of hut out here!"

Tak ran his tongue over his lips. "Be careful," he advised.

"Careful nothing! It's deserted. It's made of some sort of sheet metal, I think—quite well made, too. I'm going in to take a look."

Froude was wrestling with the dogs of the airlock, his face twisted. When the hum of the carrier vanished at the end of Christy's sentence, he redoubled his efforts.

"That won't do you any good," said Tak wearily. "The lock monitor won't open to anyone who hasn't got a suit on unless there's good air outside."

"But what's happened to her radio? Why's it gone dead?" Froude's hands went on tugging at the dogs as if he could no longer control them.

"She's gone into a metal hut," said Tak sourly. "Of course the transmission's gone dead."

Just at that moment, the speaker woke up again, in the middle of an excited sentence. "—absolutely wonderful! Come and see what I've found!"

Tak gave the other a searching glance and saw him almost wilt with relief; he hated to think what processes were going on in his mind.

"We can't come out," he said reasonably. "No suits. Can you bring it over?"

"Yes—yes, all right. I'm coming straight away. Oh, but this is fantastic!"

THE object was big, flat and awkward to get through the lock, but Christy struggled it into the cabin impatiently and then fumbled the helmet off her head. "Look at it!" she said. "Isn't it *tremendous?*"

Bewildered, Froude stared at it. "But it's only a picture of the mountains over there," he began, and let his voice die away. Tak had had the same first impression, but his mind was not so crowded with frustration; it had been barely a fraction of a second before he saw this was not just a picture, but—

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There was complete silence for three minutes by the wall chronometer, while they simply stood and gazed at it. Tak broke it finally, with a long deep sigh.

"I don't know anything about painting," he said slowly, and Christy interrupted him.

"I do!" There was genuine life and excitement in her tone for the first time since Tak had met her. "I do, and I'll swear that the man who painted that was one of the great artists of all time. Maybe the greatest. Spinoccho couldn't have done it, or Yestens, or Michelangelo—they couldn't have put the sheer *life* into a barren scene like that!"

And yet it was only some mountains. Tak found the contradiction too much for his mind to cope with; he was satisfied to accept it as a fact. Froude, more practically for once, demanded, "Are there any more?"

"Yes, a stack of them." Christy was examining the back of the painting, trying to find out what it was made of; she ran her fingers over it frowningly. "I just took the first one I saw and looked at it, and I had to show it to you right away, but there must be a dozen or so of these plates, and if all of them have pictures on as good as this—why, every art gallery on fifty planets would give all their stock for the sake of them" She sounded breathless with wonder.

"But who could have done such a thing?" Froude asked, and Christy shrugged.

"Must have been someone who got stranded here," suggested Tak. "Maybe he wrecked the ship and couldn't call for help."

"Obviously," Christy nodded. "But who was he? You don't think anyone could been painting like this without the galazy knowing about him, do you?"

"Maybe he just had nothing else to do before he died," said Tak, knowing as he spoke that it sounded foolish. Christy gave him a glance that was less than contemptuous; half an hour earlier, he realised, it would have been as acid as a lemon. The mere presence of the picture had crystallised and precipitated the tension; it was sinking like mud through still water. In another moment it would have gone.

Froude had gone to the viewport which looked over the mountains depicted in the painting, and was glancing back and forth as if trying to see where the difference between original and reproduction lay. He failed, and turned away. "To think all that—beauty—is out there, and we never saw it," he said in mild astonishment.

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"Tak, I'd like to go and look at this hut—see if we can make out anything about the painter."

"Is there any way we can all go out there?" Christy demanded. Tak thought for a minute, and finally nodded.

"There's a trick where you soak your clothes inside an ordinary spacesuit," he said lowly. "In this heat it should be good for half an hour's cooling." He half expected Froude to round on him and demand why he hadn't mentioned it before instead of letting Christy go out alone, but there was no anger left.

He felt a curious reluctance to leave the ship, and the sight of the painting, and he could tell that the others experienced it too. It was only the prospect of more and perhaps better pictures outside which let them go at all.

THERE were more paintings. Thirteen of them in a stack in the little metal hut. And every single one of them opened their eyes a little wider.

"I thought there was nothing here but red and yellow," said Tak, swallowing painfully. "How is it that when you look at the pictures you can see the greens and blues and pinks as if they were staring you in the face?"

Christy's voice came to him over the helmet phones. "If I knew that, Tak, I could paint like this. I've never seen—never dreamed of anything like it!"

"You were right, Chris," put in Froude. "He must have been one of the greatest men of all time."

A thought struck Chris, and she looked round at Tak. "Tak—he couldn't be still here, could he?"

"Where's his ship?" said Tak wearily. "I thought of that. But he *must* have crashed in the mountains somewhere nearby, and maybe he just managed to get this far and leave a cache of his paintings in the hope that one day someone would find them. Then—well, there are a lot of ways a man could die on a planet like this."

And yet it wasn't so horrible any more—not now he had been enabled to *see*, instead of looking. With a flash of unexpected insight he realised that that was why the tension, the bitterness and the anger had gone out of them: so long as the world was unwanted and hostile, it was ugly; when it was no longer ugly, it was no longer to be hated. Whoever this artist was, they owed him—perhaps as much as their sanity.

"We can't stay out here much longer," he warned. "The evaporation's beginning to die down. But it'll be sunset pretty soon now, and then it'll be cool enough for us to come out in ordinary suits."

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THE sight of the ship was the first thing that struck Painter as he approached. It *jarred*—it stuck out of the unity of the landscape like a stain. That was why he had so carefully covered his own vessel, in case the sight of it disturbed the carefully ordered precision in his mind. One had to become almost a part of the world before it was possible to represent it properly...

But it was that jarring more than anything else which informed him what the strange shape was. It looked nothing like any ship he knew of, but logically—since it was artificial—it had to be one. Which meant—

He was shaken almost to the roots of his mind. These creatures were *aliens*.

And either they were very small, or their vessel was *his* vessel—a solo craft of absolutely minimal size. Even that seemed unlikely.

He was glad that he had not casually shown himself as he approached. Now he dropped behind a ridge of piled sand and kept carefully out of sight for the last stage of his journey, until he came to a gap between two boulders from which he could see the area round the two ships, and the hut where he had stored his paintings to save uncovering his craft.

So there were three of them, not counting any more there might still be in the ship. And they were not too unlike himself, after all: bipeds, with two arms and a head. At least, that was his impression; they wore protective suits which might or might not exactly conform to their bodily shape.

He debated within himself whether he should show himself, or wait till they had gone. The latter course seemed ridiculous—after all, it was the first time he had ever run across another race in space, though it was quite possible others of his far-flung species had done so. But he was a painter; it was his life. He was no expert in communication, in psychology, in any of the myriad subjects which might have lightened the burden of opening contact between two different races—

Then it came home to him what they were doing. They had brought his paintings out of the hut, and they were looking at them. There was a certain something about their attitude—

Painter felt decision harden his mind. People who respected his work like that must be fundamentally similar to himself—obviously. There would be no problem of contact, for the barrier was already broken.

He got up and started down the slope towards the aliens. Slowly....

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"CHRISTY!" Froude's voice exploded in the helmet phones. *"Look out!"*

Tak had barely time to turn and see the monstrous shape descending on them before Christy had seized the bolt-gun from her belt and fired it in a spasm of pure terror.

The beast lasted only an instant before the force of the weapon; then it went sprawling in the sand.

Tak's heart seemed to have stopped. He waited to make sure it was still beating before he moved again, and by that time the sound of Christy sobbing as she leaned her head on her husband's shoulder echoed in his ears, mingled with Froud's comforting phrases of commendation. Awkwardly, he walked over to them.

"So that's what happened to our artist," said Froude somberly, gazing at the huge, clumsy shape of the black-hided beast bleeding dark brown into the thirsty sand.

"What do you mean?"

"Isn't it obvious? That thing must have got him." He swallowed audibly. "What a foul end for a man."

Tak hesitated. "We'd better get back to the ship," he said finally. "I m heating up. Here, want me to help you?"

Christy straightened. "I'm all right," she said in a strained voice. "It was just the shock of seeing that—coming towards me. You're right—let's go in."

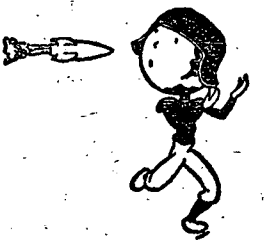
"Careful when you take off your suit, Froude," Tak reminded him. "We've got to get the water back into the circulator."

They turned and plodded across the sand towards the airlock again; as Christy was climbing up first into the cabin, Tak turned and looked back, a sudden idea forming.

"You don't suppose that *that*—"

No, the notion was ridiculous. "Nothing," he said to Froude's inquiry, and clambered up the ladder. "Wait till the crew of the rescue ship see what we've found!"

Outside, the first winds of evening were tugging at the sand which covered Painter's ship. The sun caught the fugitive gleam of metal through the grains as they fell away.



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song in a minor key

by . . . C. L. MOORE

He had been promising himself this moment for how many lonely months and years on alien worlds?

BENEATH him the clovered hill-slope was warm in the sun. Northwest Smith moved his shoulders against the earth and closed his eyes, breathing so deeply that the gun holstered upon his chest drew tight against its strap as he drank the fragrance of Earth and clover warm in the sun. Here in the hollow of the hills, willow-shaded, pillowed upon clover and the lap of Earth, he let his breath run out in a long sigh and drew one palm across the grass in a caress like a lover's.

He had been promising himself this moment for how long—how many months and years on alien worlds? He would not think of it now. He would not remember the dark spaceways or the red slag of Martian drylands or the pearl-gray days on Venus when he had dreamed of the Earth that had outlawed him. So he lay, with his eyes closed and the sunlight drenching him through, no sound in his ears but the passage of a breeze through the grass and a creaking of some insect nearby—the violent,

Northwest Smith is one of the great adventurers of Science Fiction, one of that group of cool, grey-eyed men who roam the space-ways and provide much of the inspiration for the legends that are a part of the folklore of space. Here is Northwest Smith, in a rare moment of peace, in a remarkable vignette, published here by permission of the author.

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blood-smelling years behind him might never have been. Except for the gun pressed into his ribs between his chest and the clovered earth, he might be a boy again, years upon years ago, long before he had broken his first law or killed his first man.

No one else alive now knew who that boy had been. Not even the all knowing Patrol. Not even Venusian Yarol, who had been his closest friend for so many riotous years. No one would ever know—now. Not his name (which had not always been Smith) or his native land or the home that had bred him, or the first violent deed that had sent him down the devious paths which led here—here to the clover hollow in the hills of an Earth that had forbidden him ever to set foot again upon her soil.

He unclasped the hands behind his head and rolled over to lay a scarred cheek on his arm, smiling to himself. Well, here was Earth beneath him. No longer a green star high in alien skies, but warm soil, new clover so near his face he could see all the little stems and trefoil leaves, moist earth granular at their roots. An ant ran by with waving antennae close beside his cheek. He closed his eyes and drew another deep breath. Better not even look; better to lie here like an animal, absorbing the sun and the feel of Earth blindly, wordlessly.

NOW HE was not Northwest Smith, scarred outlaw of the spaceways. Now he was a boy again with all his life before him. There would be a white-columned house just over the hill, with shaded porches and white curtains blowing in the breeze and the sound of sweet, familiar voices indoors. There would be a girl with hair like poured honey hesitating just inside the door, lifting her eyes to him. Tears in the eyes. He lay very still, remembering.

Curious how vividly it all came back, though the house had been ashes for nearly twenty years, and the girl—the girl...

He rolled over violently, opening his eyes. No use remembering her. There had been that fatal flaw in him from the very first, he knew now. If he were the boy again knowing all he knew today, still the flaw would be there and sooner or later the same thing must have happened that had happened twenty years ago. He had been born for a wilder age, when man took what they wanted and held what they could without respect for law. Obedience was not in him, and so—

As vividly as on that day it happened he felt the same old surge of anger and de-

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spair twenty years old now, felt the ray-gun bucking hard against his unaccustomed fist, heard the hiss of its deadly charge ravening into a face he hated. He could not be sorry, even now, for that first man he had killed. But in the smoke of that killing had gone up the columned house and the future he might have had, the boy himself—lost as Atlantis now—and the girl with the honey-colored hair and much, much else besides. It had to happen, he knew. He being the boy he was, it had to happen. Even if he could go back and start all over, the tale would be the same.

And it was all long past now, anyhow; and nobody remembered any more at all, except himself. A man would be a fool to lie here thinking about it any longer.

Smith grunted and sat up, shrugging the gun into place against his ribs.

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grove of the unborn

by . . . *LYN VENABLE*

Bheel still stood on the patio, transfixed with horror. He heard the terrified cry. "Dheb TynDall"—and then the vigilant Guardians got him. . .

Tyndall heard the rockets begin to roar, and it seemed as though the very blood in his veins pulsated with the surging of those mighty jets. Going? They couldn't be going. Not yet. Not without him! And he heard the roaring rise to a mighty crescendo, and he felt the trembling of the ground beneath the room in which he lay, and then the great sound grew less, and grew dim, and finally dissipated in a thin hum that dwindled finally into silence. They were gone.

Tyndall threw himself face down on his couch, the feel of the slick, strange fabric cold and unfriendly against his face. He lay there for a long time, not moving. Tyndall's thoughts during those hours, were of very fundamental things, that beneath him, beneath the structure of the building in which he was confined, lay a world that was not Earth, circling a sun that was not Sol, and that The Ship had gone and would never come back. He was alone, abandoned. He thought of The Ship, a silver streak

Glamorous Lyn Venable of Dallas, Texas, makes a first appearance in these pages (but by no means her first appearance in this field), with this sensitive story of a young man who needn't have run. A contributor to William Nolan's (OF TIME AND TEXAS, November, 1956, Fantastic Universe) famous Ray Bradbury Review, *Miss Venable wants, very very much, to be a part, albeit small, of the comeback of science fiction that is seen today, as she wrote us recently.*

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now in the implacable blackness of space, threading its way homeward through the stars to Sol, to Earth. The utter desolation which swept over him at the impact of his aloneness was more than he could endure, and he forced himself to think of something else.

Why was he here then? John Tyndall, 3rd Engineer of the starship *Polaris*. It had been such a routine trip, ferrying a group of zoologists and biologists around the galaxy looking for unclassified life-supporting planets. They had found such a world circling an obscure sun half way across the Galaxy. An ideal world for research expedition, teeming with life, the scientists were delighted. In a few short months they discovered and cataloged over a thousand varieties of flora and fauna peculiar to this planet, called Arill, after the native name which sounded something like Ahhrhell. Yes, there were natives, humanoid, civilized and gracious. They had seemed to welcome the strangers, as a matter of fact they had seemed to expect them.

The Arillians had learned English easily, its basic sounds not being too alien to their own tongue. They had quite a city there on the edge of the jungle, although, incircling the planet before landing, the expedition had noted that this was the only city. On a world only a little smaller than Earth, one city, surrounded completely by the tropical jungle which covered the rest of the world. A city without power, without machinery of any kind, and yet a city that was self-sufficient.

Well-tilled fields stretched to the very edge of the jungle, where high walls kept out the voracious growth. The fields fed the city well, and clothed it well. And there were mines to yield up fine metal and precious gems. The Earthmen had marveled, and yet, it had seemed strange. On all this planet, just one city with perhaps half a million people within its walls. But this was not a probem for the expedition

The crew of the *Polaris* and the members of the expedition had spent many an enjoyable evening in the dining hall of the palace-like home of the Rhal, who was something more than a mayor and something less than a king. Actually, Arrill seemed to get along with a minimum of government. All in all, the Earthmen had summed up the Arrillians as being a naive, mild, and courteous people. They probably still thought so, all of them, that is, except Tyndall.

Of course, now that he looked back upon it, there has been a few things.... that business about The Bugs, as the Earthmen had

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dubbed the oddly ugly creatures who seemed to occupy something of the position of a sacred cow in the Arrillian scheme of things. The Bugs came in all sizes, that is all sizes from a foot or so in length up to the size of a full human.

The Bugs were not permitted to roam the streets and market places, like the sacred cows of the Earthly Hindus. The Bugs were kept in huge pens, which none but a few high ranking priests were permitted to enter, and although the Earthmen were not prevented from standing outside the pens and watching the ugly beasts munching grass or basking in the sun, the Arrillians always seemed nervous when the strangers were about the pens. The Earthmen had shrugged and reflected that religion was a complexity difficult enough at home, needless to probe too deeply into the Arrillian.

But The Time had been something else again, bringing with it, the first sign of real Arrillian fanaticism and the first hint of violence. Tyndall and four companions were strolling in a downtown section of the city, when all at once a hoarse cry in Arrillian shattered the quiet hum of street activity.

"What did he say?" asked one of Tyndall's companions, who had not learned much Arrillian.

"I-I think, 'A Time! A Time!' What could..." he never finished the sentence, all about them Arrillians had prostrated themselves in the rather dirty street, covering their faces with their hands, lying face down. The Earthmen hesitated a moment, and a priest of Arrill appeared as though from nowhere, a wicked scimitar like weapon in his hand and a face tense with anger.

"Dare you," he hissed in Arillian, "dare you not hide your eyes at A Time!" He pushed one of the Earthmen with surprising strength, and the latter stumbled to his knees. All five men hastened to ape the position of the prostrate Arrillians; they knew better to risk committing sacrilege on a strange planet. As Tyndall sank to the ground and covered his eyes, he heard that priest mutter another sentence, in which his own name was included. He thought it was "You, Tyn-Dall...even you."

A few moments later a bell sounded from somewhere, and the buzzing of conversation began around them, along with the shuffling, scraping sound of many people getting to their feet at once. A hand touched Tyndall's shoulder and an Arrillian voice, laughing now, purred, "Up stranger, up, The Time is past."

The Earthmen got to their feet. Everything about them was the same as though noth-

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ing had happened, people strolling along the street, going in and out of shops, stopping to chat.

"I guess that was the all-clear," commented one wryly.

The others laughed nervously, but Tyndall was strangely troubled, he was thinking of the strange words of the priest, "You, Tyn-Dall, even you." Why should he have known, and not the others? He tried to forget it. Arrillian was a complex tongue with confusing syntax, perhaps the priest had said something else. But Tyndall knew one thing for certain, the mention of his name had been unmistakable.

The mood hung on, and quite suddenly Tyndall had asked, "I wonder about the children. Why do you suppose it is?"

One of the men laughed, "Maybe they feed them to The Bugs." At no time, during their stay on Arrill, had they seen a single child, or young person under the age of about twenty one. The crew had speculated upon this at great length, coming to the conclusion that the youngsters were kept secluded for some reason known only to the Arrillians, probably some part of their religion. One of them had made so bold as to ask one of the scientists who politely told him that since his group was not composed of ethnologists or theologists, but of biologists and zoologists, they were interested neither in the Arrillians, their offspring nor their religion, but merely in the flora and fauna of the planet, both of which seemed to be rather deadly. The expedition had had several close calls in the jungle, and some of the plants seemed as violently carnivorous as the animals.

It was just a few days after the incident that the Arrillians kidnapped Tyndall. It had been a simple, old fashioned sort of job, pulled off with efficiency and dispatch as he wandered a few hundred away from the ship. It was late, and he had been unable to sleep, so he had strolled out for a smoke. The nightwatch must have been somewhere about on patrol, probably only a few hundred feet away, on the other side of the ship. It happened suddenly and silently, the hand clapped over his mouth, the forearm constricting his windpipe, his legs jerked out from under him, and a rag smelling sickly-sweet shoved under his nose, bringing oblivion.

When he came to consciousness, he found himself in this room, and he knew that since then, many days and nights had passed. His wants were meticulously attended to, his bath prepared,

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his food brought to him regularly, delicious and steaming, with a generous supply of full-bodied Arrillian wine to wash it down. Fresh clothes were brought to him daily, the loose flowing, highly ornamented robe of the Arrillian noble. Tyndall knew he was no ordinary prisoner, and somehow, this face made him doubly uneasy.

And then, tonight, the ship had blasted off without him. Tyndall could easily reconstruct what had happened when his crew mates had inquired about him, at the palace and in town. "Tyn-Dall?" Then, a sorrowful expression, a shrugging of the shoulders, a pointing toward the death infested jungle, and a mournful shaking of the head, sign language which in any tongue meant, "Tyn-Dall wanders too far from your ship. He becomes lost. Alas, he does not know our jungle and its perils." Those who spoke a little English would make some expression of sympathy.

Maybe the crew was a little suspicious, maybe they thought there was something fishy about the thing, and then they thought of the unhappy results of what was commonly referred to as an "interplanetary incident." Ever since the people of the second planet of Alpha Centauri, in the early days of extraterrestrial exploration, had massacred an entire expedition because the captain had mortally insulted a tribal leader by refusing a sacred fruit, such incidents had been avoided at all costs.

And so, they dared not offend the Arrillians by questioning the veracity of their statements. And the jungle *was* deadly, so they looked a little longer, and asked a few more questions. After a little while, the scientists had completed their work and were anxious to get home, and so, the ship blasted off, without him.

All this had passed kaleidoscopically in Tyndall's mind as he lay on the couch in his luxurious prison, too numb to weep or even curse. His reverie was broken by the clicking of the lock and he raised up to see the door opening. An Arrillian servant stood there, his silver hair done up in the complicated style which denoted male house servants. He was unarmed. The houseman smiled, roared in imitation of a rocket, made a swooping gesture with one hand to indicate the departing ship, then pointed at Tyndall and at the open door. The servant bowed and departed, leaving the door slightly ajar. Now that the ship was gone, he was free to leave his room.

Tyndall stepped cautiously out of the room and found himself in a long hall, with

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many doors opening from it on either side, much like a hotel corridor. One end of the hall seemed to open out onto a garden and he started in that direction.

The doorway opened out into a patio which overlooked a vast and perfectly tended garden. The verdant perfection of the scene was marred only by one of The Bugs, sunning itself and gnawing on the stem of a flower. Tyndall was impressed again with the repulsive ugliness of the thing. This one was the size of a small adult human, and even vaguely human in outline, although the brownish armored body was still more suggestive of a big bug than anything else known to him. There were even rudimentary wings furled close to the curving back, and the underside was a dirty, striped grey. Tyndal shuddered, wondering why the Arrillians, who so loved to surround themselves with beauty, should choose so horrendous a creature as the object of their worship, or protection.

He heard running footsteps behind him, and turned to see the Arrillian houseman, breathless, with an expression of greatest concern on his face. The servant bowed respectfully before Tyndall, then gestured at the garden, shook his head vigorously from side to side and tugged at the Earthman's sleeve.

"Forbidden territory eh? Okay, old fellow, what now?"

The servant motioned for Tyndall to follow him, and ushered him down the hall from whence he had just come, and into another of the rooms opening off from it. The very old man reclining upon the low, Roman-like couch, Tyndall recognized at once as his host, the Rhal of Arrill.

The Rhal touched the fingertips of both hands to his forehead in the Arrillian gesture of greeting, and Tyndall did the same. He noticed several male Arrillians standing near the back of the room, although the servant had bowed and retired.

"Well, Tyn-Dall, how do you enjoy the hospitality of Ahhreel?" He, of course, gave the native pronunciation to the name which was almost Teutonic in sound and unpronouncable for Tyndall because of the sound given to the double aspirate, for which he knew no equivalent.

"Your English, Dheb Rhal, has improved greatly since our last meeting," commented Tyndall guardedly, using the Arrillian prefix of extreme respect.

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The old man smiled. "Your friends were kind enough to lend me books and also the little grooved disks hat make voice. He gestured toward an old fashioned wind-up type phonograph which Tyndall recognized at once as being standard aboard interstellar vessels, and for just such a purpose. The Rhal continued, "For teaching English very fine. How are you enjoying our hospitality, I ask again?"

Tyndall was stuck on Arrill and he knew it. There was no need to cook his own goose by being deliberately offensive. "I appreciate the hospitality of Arrill, I express my thanks for the consideration of my hosts but—if I may ask a question?"

"Yes?"

"What, in the wisdom of the Dheb Rhal, is the reason for my—er—detainment?"

"To answer that, Tyn-Dall, I must tell you something of the past of Ahhreel, and of her destiny." At these words, the other Arrillians in the room drew closer, and the Rhal motioned them to a couch at his feet and nodded toward Tyndall, requesting that he join them. Tyndall noticed that the others were gazing up into the old man's face with an expression of raptness, even of reverence. He knew that the Rhal did not possess an especially exalted position politically, even though he was head of the city. He guessed therefore that the Rhal must be the religious ruler of Arrill as well.

The Rhal began, intoning the words as though he were reciting a ritual, "There was a time, many thousands of Khreelas ago, when the kingdom of Ahhreel was not one small city, as you see it now, but a mighty empire, girdling the world in her vastness. But the people of Ahreel had become evil in their ways, and her cities were black with sin. It was then that Xheev himself left his kingdom in paradise and appeared to the people of Ahhreel, and he told them that he was displeased, and that bad times would fall upon Ahhreel, and that her people would dwindle in number, and became exceedingly few, and the jungle would reclaim her emptied cities. One city, and only one, would survive and prosper, and the people of that city would be given the chance to redeem Ahhreel, and remove the heavy hand of Xheev's terrible punishment.

"All this came to pass, and in the dark Khreelas that followed, all of Ahhreel vanished except this city. Now, for many, many thousands of Khreelas, the people of this city have striven to redeem Ahhreel by obeying the sacred laws of Xheev.

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"Xheeve had promised that when the punishment was ended, he would send a sign, and his sign would be that a great silver shell should fall from the heavens, and within would be Xheev's own emissary, who must wed the ranking priestess of Xheev, establishing again the rapport between the kingdom of paradise and the world of Ahhreel."

When The Rhan had finished, the other Arrillians in the room fastened the same look of reverence upon Tyndall which they had formerly reserved for the Rhan.

Tyndall chose his words carefully. "But there were many aboard my vessel. Why did you, Dheb Rhal select me as the emissary of Xheev?"

"Xheev selected you, I recognized you, as of all your companions, you and you alone have the sun colored hair, which is the sacred color of Xheev."

Tyndall was able to question the Rhal almost cooly, the trap was already sprung, the ship was gone. Now, he only wanted to know the how, and the why. An accident of pigmentateion, only that had brought him to this. Sun colored hair!

"But Dheb Rhal, did my friends and I not often tell you of ourselves, of the place from which came? A world, a world like your own?"

The old man smiled. "Do not think me naive, Tyn-Dall. I am quite aware that you are but a man, a man from another world, although quite an incredible world it must be. I know also that you were, until this hour, unaware of your destiny. I knew that when my priest reported that you ignored the Ritual Of The Time, until literally forced to obey. That is why we had to use...devious means to make certain that your companions would not prevent the fulfilment of the prophesy. Now, of course, you understand.

"I do not think the priestess Lhyreesa will make you unhappy, Tyn-Dall."

This was not Earth and these people were not Earthmen. The thought now did not bring the bitter pain it had at first, right after the ship left. Earth already was becoming hazy in Tyndall's mind, a lovely globe of green somewhere...somewhere far, and home once, a long time ago.

No, the Arrillians were not Earthmen, but they were human, and an attractive, gracious race. Life would not be bad, among the Arrillians, especially as the espoused of the ranking priestess of Arrill. Tyndall fingered the rich material of his Arrillian robe; he thought of the food, the wine, the servants. No,

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he decided, not bad at all. One thing, though—this priestess Lhyreesa...

"I have, then, but one request to make, Dheb Rhal, I would like to see the priestess Lhyreesa."

The old man almost chuckled, "That is understandable, Tyn-Dall, but it is not yet The Time."

Tyndall, reveling in the strength of his position, grew bolder. "I would like very much, Dheb Rhal, to see her now."

The Rhal's face darkened. "Very well, Tyn-Dall, but I warn you, do not enter The Grove. There is death there, death that even I am powerless to prevent. The Guardians will not harm her, but any stranger...will not live many minutes in The Grove."

"I will not enter, Dheb Rhal."

"Tyn-Dall, The Time is very soon, possibly this very hour. Will you not wait?"

"I prefer not to wait, Dheb Rhal."

The Rhal gestured to a young Arrillian. "Bheel, show Tyn-Dall to the Grove of the priesteess Lhyreesa."

The younger man protested, "But Dheb Rhal, so near The Time, what if..."

"Do as I command," snapped the Rhal.

Bheel turned silently, motioning for Tyndall to follow. The young Arrillian led Tyndall the length of the corridor, back to the patio he had stepped onto by mistake earlier in the day. Bheel stepped respectfully aside. Tyndall looked out into the garden: the sun was beginning to set, the long shadows stretched across the dim recesses of tropic greenery. The huge insect like thing, was still there, stretched out in a narrow strip of sunlight, catching the last failing waves of warmth from the skinking sun.

Tyndall turned to the Arrillian. "Where might I find the priestess Lhyressa?" he asked.

"There, Dheb Tyn-Dall."

"I see no one. Where do you say?"

Bheel pointed. "There, Dheb Tyn-Dall, where I point, you see the priestess Lhyreesa taking the late afternoon sun...unless your eyesight is exceedingly bad, Dheb Tyn-Dall, you cannot fail to see...."

Tyndall's eyesight was exceedingly good. He followed that pointing finger, past the pillar that supported the roof of the patio, past the first row of alien green plants, past the second and third rows, to the clearing, to the little patch of sunlight, to the thing lying there. That monstrous, misshapen bug... The Bug... The Priestess Lhyreesa!

Tyndall felt a pounding,

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skull-shattering madness closing in on him. This was a joke, of course. No, no joke. A dream then? No, not that either. In only a few split seconds it happened. Tyndall had leapt the rail around the patio, and was streaking through The Grove, heading for its outer boundary. The city—if he could get out of The Grove, there would be places to hide in the city. Narrow street, empty cellars, dim, dim alleys. They'd never find him there! Run now, run before he was overtaken!

But he was not being pursued. Bheel still stood on the patio, transfixed with horror. He heard the Arrillian's terrified cry "Dheb Tyn-dall...!" And then a rope shot out and grabbed him by the ankles. Not a rope really, a green something, and there were others around his arms, his chest, his hips, wrapping him in their sticky green embrace. The Guardians! He tried to cry out but one of the verdant fronds enveloped his throat so tightly he could not utter a sound. The innocent green things of The Grove were vigilant guardians indeed. They seemed to be merely holding him immobile, but Tyndall realized with sick horror that their pressure was increasing, so little at a time, but so steadily.

And something was happening out there in the sunlight too. The creature had convulsively grasped the branch of a bush and was clinging weakly to it, great tremors wracking its body. It seemed to be struggling, suffering, dying...even as he was. In his agony, Tyndall laughed.

"A Time! A Time!" The voice came from the patio. Tyndall saw Bheel throw himself face down on the floor, covering his eyes with his hands. He heard the cry echoed within the palace and then like a mighty roar outside in the city. And then there was silence, silence broken only by the sound of his own breathing as he dragged his tortured lungs across his shattered ribs.

He saw The Bug give a great heave, and then it seemed to split open, the entire skin splitting in a dozen places and a hand...A HAND reached from within that dying hulk grasped the bush to which it clung. A white slender hand on a fragile wrist, and then the arm was free, a woman's arm, a beautiful arm.

Tyndall began, dimly, and too late, to understand.

A leg kicked free...the slender ankle...the amply fleshed thigh.

Tyndall clung to consciousness doggedly. The Guardian was crushing the last dregs of life out of him

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now, and even the pain seemed to recede. His mind was very, very clear. So that was it. A word once heard in a long forgotten classroom, and then the scientists of the expedition. Metamorphosis...he had meant to ask them what...but he remembered now...what it meant. A passing from one form into another... Had he failed a biology test once because he didn't know what metamorphosis meant...dimly ...dimly...he saw...

The last thing Tyndall ever saw was the Priestess Thyreesa as she stepped out of the empty hulk, kicking it away with a disdainful toe. Breathless from her ordeal, she sank to the grass, her breasts heaving with exhaustion.

She sat there for a few minutes in the sunlight, then she tossed her head and spread her long raven hair out on her shoulders, the better to dry it in the waning sun.

FUNERAL CHANT

Êe-aiia-eaiia
ookalaa makka oom
Maa thi sona rom
Paradiita
Theradiita
Moofadiita

We who are about to pass over
into the final darkness
Salute Thee, O Mother Sun,
Bestower of life and warmth,
Befriender of the young,
Comforter of the ancient!

Ee-thama-ookalaa
meena maana
Ifalla tivara
sheevaara dii
Tore-i-tore
achali varra taataa

We face the darkness
without fear and trembling,
Conscious of the strength
that you have shared with us,
Season after season,
throughout our several lifetimes.

Ee-tha-ookalaa
thali-ookala samathii
mekhe mekhe
Tikkavarappu laatika
marra marra kalata
Ram roovatika maerdi
ookalati
ee-a-thamamarra
varappi saati

We face the darkness—
the final darkness from whence we
came—
Aware of our shortcomings
and aware of your mercy....
In the long sleep of the final
darkness,
We will carry this awareness
with us!

Translated from the Upper Venusian

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mex

by . . . WILLIAM LOGAN

Perhaps it was just as well that I did not tell them what I was ...

WHAT THEY called me, that was what started it. I'm as good an American as the next fellow, and maybe a little bit better than men like that, big men drinking in a bar who can't find anything better to do than to spit on a man and call him Mex. As if a Mexican is something to hide or to be ashamed of. We have our own heroes and our own strength and we don't have to bend down to men like that, or any other men. But when they called me that I saw red and called them names back.

"Mex kid," one of the men said, a big red-haired bully with his sleeves rolled back and muscles like ropes on the big hairy arms. "Snot-nosed little Mex brat."

I called him a name. He only laughed back at me and turned his back, waving a hand for the bartender. Maybe in a big city in the North it would be different and probably it would not: this toleration we hear about is no more good than an open fight, and there must be understanding instead. But here near the border, just on the American side of the border, a Mexican is called fair game,

Talented William Logan, though he hails from Dodger territory, tells a quiet story from down near the Mexican border, where men are very close to ancestral memories and to the things which dwell in the shadows. Logan is one of the more interesting of the newer writers.

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and a seventeen-year-old like me is less than nothing to them, to the white ones who go to the big bars.

I thought carefully about what to do, and finally when I had made my mind up I went for him and tried to hit him. But other men held me back, and I was kicking and shouting with my legs off the ground. When I stopped they put me down, so I started for the big red-haired man again and they had to stop me again. The red-haired man was laughing all this time. I wanted to run, back to my own family in their little house, and yet running would have been wrong; I was too angry to run, so I stayed."

"My sister," I said. "My sister is a witch and I will get her to put a curse on you." I was very angry, you must understand this.

And of course they had no idea that my sister is a real witch, and her curses are real, and only last year Manuel Valdez had died from the effects of her curse. Of all people, sometimes I wish I were my sister most of all, to curse people and see them shrivel and sicken and choke and die.

"Go ahead, half-pint," one of the other men yelled. "Get your sister to put a curse on me. I bet she knows who I am; I been with every Mex girl this side of the border."

This made me see red; my sister is pure and must be pure, since she is a witch. And she is not like some of the others even aside from that. I have heard her talk about them and I know.

I called him a name and ran up to him and hit him; my fist against his solid side felt good, but some other men pulled me off again. Yet it was impossible to leave. This was wrong for me, and I had to make it right. "I shall get my father to fight you, since he is a giant ten feet tall."

The men laughed at me, not knowing, of course, that my father is a giant ten feet tall in truth, and my mother a sweet siren, like those in the books, the old books, with spells in her eyes and a strange power. They did not know I was not a daydreaming child but a man who told truth.

And they laughed; I grew angry again and told them many things, calling them names in Spanish, which they did not understand. That only made them laugh the more.

Finally I left; it was necessary for me to leave, since I was not wanted. But it was necessary, too, for me to make things right. Nights later they were dead for what they had said and done.

For I tell the truth always, and I had told them about my sister and my father and my mother. But one thing I had not told them.

I am sorry they could never know I was the winged thing that frightened and killed them, one by one...

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g-r-r-r . . . !

by . . . *ROGER ARCOT*

He had borne the thousand and one injuries with humility and charity. But the insults! These were more than he could suffer....

GR-R-R-R! There he goes again! Brother Ambrose could scarce restrain the hatred that seethed and churned in his breast, as his smallish eyes followed Brother Lorenzo headed once more for his beloved geraniums, the inevitable w a t e r i n g—pot gripped in both hands, the inevitable devotions rising in a whispered stream from his saintly lips. The very fact the man lived was a mockery to human justice: God's blood, but if thoughts could only kill.

Ave, Virgo!

The thousand and one injuries of Fray Lorenzo he had borne as a Christian monk should, with humility and charity. But the insults, aye, the insults to faith and reason! They were more than a generous Father could expect His most adoring servant to suffer, weren't they? To have to sit next to the man, for instance, at evening meal and hear his silly prattle of the weather. Next year's crop of cork: we can scarcely expect oak-galls, he says. Isn't *petroselinum* the name for parsley? (No, it's

Roger Arcot explores the fringes of a really never forgotten world, the introduction to which is an aged manuscript De Necromantiae, and *the wish, not too repressed, to pledge your soul to the Devil! There are many strange memories and unhappy frustrated souls in this Fantastic Universe of ours—strange and sinister memories and stranger urges, frightening urges that refuse to die in the heart of Brother Ambrose.*

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Greek, you swine. And what's the Greek name for Swine's Snout? I could hurl it at you, like the Pope hurling anathema.) *Salve tibi!* It sticks in one's craw to bless him with the rest. Would God our cloister numbered thirty-and-nine instead of forty.

For days now, for weeks, Brother Ambrose had witnessed and endured the false piety of the man. How he'd ever got admitted to the order in the first place beat all supposition. It must have been his sanctimonious apple-cheeks or (Heaven forbid such simony), some rich relative greased the palm of the prior. *Saint, forsooth!*

Brother Ambrose recalled just a week previous; they had been outside the walls, a round dozen of the brothers, gathering the first few bushels of grapes to make the good Benedictine wine. And all men tended to their duty in the vineyard—save who? Save lecherous Lorenzo, whose job was to attend the press. Picked the assignment himself, most likely, so he could ogle the brown thighs and browner ankles of Dolores squatting on the Convent bank, *gitana* slut with her flashing eyes and hint of sweet delight in those cherry-red lips and coquettish tossing shoulders. A man could see she was child of the devil, flesh to tempt to eternal hellfire.

But how skillful Brother Lorenzo had been in keeping the glow in his dead eye from being seen by the others! Only Ambrose had known it was there. Invisible to even the world, perhaps; but lurking just the same in Lorenzo's — feverishly disguised brain. *Si*, there and lusting beyond a doubt. By one's faith, the blue-black hair of Dolores would make any weak man itch; and the stories that had floated on the breeze that day, livelily exchanged between her and that roguish Sanchicha, the *lavandera;* Lorenzo must surely have lapped them all up like a hungry spaniel, though he cleverly turned his head away so you would not guess. After all, Ambrose, scarcely a step closer, could recall clearly every word of the bawdy tales!

Back to the table again; and Brother Ambrose once more noticed how Fray Lorrenzo never let his fork and knife lie crosswise, an obvious tribute he, himself, always made in Our Senor's praise. Nor did Lorenzo honor the Trinity by drinking his orange-pulp in three quiet sips; rather (the Arian heretic) he drained it at a gulp. Now, he was out trimming his myrtle-bush. And touching up his roses.

Gr-r-r, again! Watching his his enemy putter away in the deepening twilight that followed the decline of the An-

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dalusian sun, Brother Ambrose recalled the other traps he had lain to trip the hypocrite. Traps set and failed; but oh, so delicious anyhow, these attempts to send him flying off to Hell where he belonged: a Carthar or a Manichee. That last one, involving the pornographic French novel so scrofulous and wicked. How could it failed to have snared its prey? Especially, when Fray Ambrose had spent such sleepless nights, working out his plot in great detail?

Brother Ambrose allowed himself an inward chortle, as he paced along the portico, recollecting how close to success the scheme had come. The book had had to be read first (or re-read, rather) by Ambrose to determine just which chapter would be most apt to damn a soul with concupiscient suggestion. Gray paper with blunt type the whole book had been easy enough to grasp for that matter—what with the words so badly spelled out. The cuckledry tales of Boccacio and that gay old archpriest, Juan Ruiz de Hita, what dry reading they seemed by comparison—almost like decretals.

As if by misadventure, Brother Ambrose had left the book in Lorenzo's cell, the pages doubled down at the woeful sixteenth print. Ah, there had been a passage! Simply glancing at it, you groveled hand and foot in Belial's grip.

But, that twice-cursed Lorenzo must have had the devil's luck that day. A breeze sprang up to flip the volume closed; and the monk, not knowing the book's owner and espying only its name, had handed it over to the Prior who had promptly turned the monastery upside down in search of further such adulterous contraband!

Worse fortune followed. The next day, Brother Lorenzo had come down with a temporary stroke of blindness—it lasted only a week; but even so, for seven days Ambrose had been forced to labor in his stead in the drafty library, copying boresome scrolls in a light scracely less dim than moonlight. Worse still, the Prior had found mistakes: letters dropped, transposed (Latin was so bothersomely regular; compared to the vulgar tongue). For what he called such "inexcusable slovenliness," the Prior had imposed a penance of bread and water and extra toil.

Slovenliness! Why didn't the Prior—was he blind, too? —notice the deadly sins that were each day so neatly practised by Brother Lorenzo? They went unpunished. Probably, God's Angel would even be found to have been asleep when Judgment Day

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came around and Lorenzo would slip into Heaven by a wink, as one might say.

Obviously, there was no justice, except such as man would make himself, Brother Ambrose had at last decided.

Ave Maria, plena gratiae.

Now at last, he was alone in his cell, free finally from the unendurable (sometimes it seemed everlasting) torment of Brother Lorenzo's presence. Twenty-nine distinct damnations listed in Galatians, if you cared to look up the text; and not one of them could the enemy be made to trip on, a-dying.

In fact, of late, so bad had the situation grown that Brother Ambrose had even once considered pledging his soul to Satan. Oh, not for keeps! No enmity was worth that dread sacrifice. But as a trick, sort of—with a flaw in the indenture that proud Lucifer would miss until it was too late to wriggle out of the bargain.

But that had been two days ago.

Now, a better scheme presented itself to Brother Ambrose, engendered by that forced labor within the dreary precincts of the convent library. For that was where (and when) he had made his delightful discovery, the one that would now redeem him from all his irritations and travail. The discovery that would rid him of Brother Lorenzo for always!

It had happened like this.

Inasmuch as the monastery was over eight hundred years old, many ancient books and moldy scrolls lay forgotten in the cobwebby corners of the great library, especially where the light was gloomy. One afternoon during his week of enforced toil, Brother Ambrose had sought the shelter of one of these ill-lighted and seldom-visited nooks of the building to recover certain lost hours of sleep, hours that had gone astray the night before as he sat up in his lonely cell and brooded over his wrongs. But before his drowsy head could nod off into dreams completely, his eye had chanced to notice a faded scroll that jutted forth from its fellows on the shelves. Starting to push the offender back in place, Ambrose's fingers had hesitated when he noticed the title: *De Necromantiae.*

Surely, thought the monk, such a book belonged on the Index. Then, it occurred to him that possibly the copy in front of him was the only one of its kind in the world, in which case not even the Holy Father could be expected to know it existed. Then, how could it be on the Index or be forbidden?

Taking advantage of this personal achievement in casuistry, Brother Ambrose

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promptly untied the scroll and began reading.

What he discovered there interested him very much. We do not intend to describe all of the marvels unfolded for him in that venerable mildewed manuscript, for some of the more gruesome mysteries of the supernatural world are better left unrevealed; but let it be said at least, that one chapter intrigued Brother Ambrose immensely. So much so, that he shamelessly whipped out his scissors and, nipping that section, stuck it inside his rough wool robes so he might peruse it at greater leisure within the privacy of his cell.

The chapter that evoked such delight and interest within Brother Ambrose's complicated brain was one that had been penned in the early ages of the Church by a lay-brother who had concerned himself with pagan magic. In it, he had described the fiendish habits and activities of werewolves and had actually even presented a a formula. *Ut Fiat Homo Lupinus* it was entitled, which purported to give the secret words and ritual necessary to achieve the transformation from man to beast.

At last, the opportunity had arrived Ambrose's way to achieve his long-desired revenge on Brother Lorenzo!

Twenty-four hours had passed since the momentous discovery. The moment was at hand. Night again had settled upon the Spanish cloister's, the last bell had tolled; and all the good and hardy men were supposed to be at sound sleep on their rough iron cots. But in Brother Ambrose's chilly cell, a small candle burned—casting sickly light that produced huge flickering shadows against the whitewashed walls.

Brother Ambrose held the treasured piece of manuscript between his hands. It was difficult to make out the faded Latin; the writing was cramped and crude, and Ambrose was no scholar to boot. But like all persons of his times, he was quite well-aware of the existence of werewolves, werefoxes, and other such monsters; and he held no doubt but what the spell would work.

It was the scheming brother's plan to creep in the stealth of night down the corridor to the barred oak door of Lorenzo's own simple cell. There, he would knock; lightly enough to disturb no other sleepers, yet loud enough that the rapping would summon Brother Lorenzo from whatever wicked dreams might be festering in his own sleeping mind.

As Fray Lorenzo's naked footsteps were heard pattering across the bare floor, Ambrose would drink the

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bat's blood he had collected, sniff the wolfbane he had ground to ash, and pronounce the obscure Celtic words that would alter the very atoms of his flesh, transforming them into an obscene travesty of life. Brother Lorenzo, when he opened the door, would be met not by a fellow human being, but by a snarling fanged wolf that would hurl its hairy bulk at the drowsy monk's own throat.

The next day, the entire monastery would be awakened, of course, by shouts of the news that foul murder had been discovered. But no amount of detection would ever manifest the bestial murderer. Brother Ambrose would hug to his soul the secret of his crime until the day of his shriving.

At length, the hour had grown so late that it was certain even the Prior himself must have long since retired.

Brother Ambrose made ready to carry out his deed. He rose from his cot, removed the coarse brown robe that normally he wore to bed as well as in his daily rounds so that his long-unwashed body stood naked. There must be no chance for telltale blood to stain his clothes, when his fierce talons and wolfish teeth tore and rended at human flesh.

Carrying his precious piece of scroll, he departed from his cell and groped his way down the stone corridor until the light improved enough for him to see his way. Luckily, a patch of moonlight illuminated the very space in front of the accursed Brother Lorenzo's door. What fortune!

Brother Ambrose halted and stared at the door as though his eyes could see through it, at the sleeping form within. He sucked in a deep breath. His palms were sweaty; his heartbeat rapid. For a moment, he was almost ready to back out.

Then suddenly, the memory of all the hundreds of grudges he bore against Lorenzo surged through him. Hatred built up a massive reservoir, that broke out over his crumbling conscience and flooded his body with anger and wild resentment. His teeth gritted. What had he been thinking of—to retreat now, with revenge so nearly at hand!

He rapped. A moment later, he heard a creaking sound like Brother Lorenzo slipping out of bed.

Trembling, he lifted the phial of bat's-blood, drank it down. It tasted salty. He chewed on the wolfbane powder until it mixed with the saliva of his mouth, then he swallowed. Holding the ancient scroll-segment before him, he began to repeat the badly-written incantation: *Ut fiat homo lupinus, pulvis ar-*

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nicae facenda est et dum....

A thousand jolts assailed body, as if he had been struck by all the lightnings in heaven. Then, came a rushing paralysis, a distortion of time and space, a dread feeling of disintegration and death ...

The door to Brother Lorenzo's cell began to recede, swelling in volume as it did. The ceiling of the corridor likewise retreated at ever-increasing pace. Staring down at his own dwindling frame, Ambrose saw that the slug-white flesh was now covered with thick fur, even as the limbs were gnarling—

Then, suddenly the door opened. Brother Lorenzo stepped out, his kindly pious face wrinkled with sleep but otherwise showing no irritation or displeasure at being summoned from his rest. At first, the monk seemed not to have noticed Ambrose's form, for he gazed above him and away.

Ambrose kept on shrinking.

Finally, Brother Lorenzo's gaze chanced to glance downward. But still, his features mirrored no recognition or alarm; only puzzlement.

Now, thought Ambrose. *now is the time for me to snarl.*

But no snarl, nor semblance of a snarl, emerged from his lips. Rather, his lips had elongated into long sucking probosci, while already a third pair of limbs had commenced growing from his furred-over abdomen.

This was not a wolf-like form, he was assuming, Ambrose suddenly realized in terror. But if it was not lupine, what was it? Had he misread the incantation? Had he mispronounced a simple word?

The weird crawling form into which he had metamorphosed was now hardly an inch higher than the surface of the floor. But Ambrose's eyes had bulged into great many-faceted orbs capable of seeing objects with greater clarity than ever. Inches away from him, he made out the segment of scroll he had discarded after reading aloud from it. Crawling over to it, he perused the beginning words of the spell.

And it suddenly dawned on him (while what passed for a heart and ventricles within his pulpy form began simulating horror) that the ancient monk of centuries ago who had first copied the incantation must have been as careless of spelling as he. For the charm obviously did not convert its user into a werewolf, but rather some other animal ...

Dredging up all the miserable Latin he knew, Ambrose fished for some word similar to *lupinus.*

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And suddenly he had it!

Pulicus! That was the word the sloppy copyist of yesteryear had wrongly transcribed.

From the word *pulex*, meaning "flea."

Not how to become a wolf-like man, but a fleaiike man—that was what the formula had described.

Ambrose, the flea, braced himself. Gathering his powerful legs under him, he leaped in soaring flight to land upon the object of hatred—the giant Brother Lorenzo, who towered so high above him.

But the gentle and considerate Brother Lorenzo, who probably would not have hurt hair nor hide of any other creature on Earth—even he knew full well that there is only one thing you can do to discourage a flea.

Swat!

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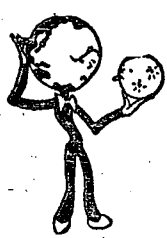

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out of this world convention

by FORREST J. ACKERMAN

An eye-witness account of the 14th World Science Fiction Convention in session.

I was a spy for the FBI—the Fantasy Bureau of Investigation! Learning of a monster meeting of science fiction "fen" in New York, I teleported myself 3,000 miles from the Pacificoast to check the facts on the monsters. And it was true—the 14th World SciFi Con was tremonstrous.

In all seriousness, the *Newyorcon* was one of the greatest aggregations of s.f. enthusiasts I have ever seen. A far cry from the *Nycon*, the *first* "world" s.f. con of 17 years before, when the turnout of 125 was considered colossal. Now more than twelve hundred fans, authors, editors, artists, publishers, agents, anthologists, reviewers and readers of science fiction and fantasy registered for the Labor Day Weekend gathering of the clans, a conclave of the slans.

From 37 of the 48 states they came. And from Canada, Cuba, England, Germany, India, Israel and the West Indies. The rollcall of celebrities read like the Who's Who of S. F. Prodom: Theodore Sturgeon, Isaac Asimov, Fritz Leiber, Willy Ley, Nelson Bond, John W. Campbell Jr., L. Sprague de Camp, James Blish, Judith

Forrest J. Ackerman, prominent Los Angeles agent and Science Fiction enthusiast, reports on the recent World Convention in New York. Mr. Ackerman, who attended the first World Convention seventeen years ago, has been prominent in SF circles since the early thirties.

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Merril, "Ted" Carnell (Editor of New Worlds), Kelly Freas, Edmond Hamilton, Leigh Brackett, Anthony Boucher, William Tenn, James E. Gunn, Frank Belknap Long Jr., and numerous others, including Guest of Honor Arthur C. Clarke.

A standing ovation was given Arthur Clarke before and after his speech at the Banquet, a serious address that lasted forty-five minutes and covered many philosophical facets of the s.f. field. Especially rousing hands were given two of the real old timers present, artist Frank R. Paul (Guest of Honor of the first Convention), and—out of the Ark—the man who once was an assistant to Thomas Alva Edison, the pioneer novelist of scientific romances and the man who discovered the Golden Atom—Ray Cummings. World famous cartoonist Al Capp gave a hilarious speech at the Banquet Sunday night, other large laughs being garnered on the occasion by Isaac Asimov and Anthony Boucher, Robert Bloch again proving that he has no peer as a Master of Ceremonies.

The Masquerade Ball was filmed for televising, and was a sight for bugging eyes. Extraterrestrial glamour girls came in spectrumatic colors: one, Ruth Landis of Venus (formerly Nuyok), was a verdant beauty, fresh as a breath of chlorophyll; while tall Tam Otteson, a recent import from England, had the judges agreeing that just looking at her was an education. Olga Ley won for the Most Beautiful costume, and Jos Christoff—a survivor from the first convention of them all—was another prize winner. Monsters, mutants, scientists, spacemen, aliens, and assorted "Things" thronged the ballroom floor as the flashbulbs popped.

John Campbell lectured on and demonstrated his controversial psionic Hieronymus machine, and famous fans sprang from der woodwork out—Sam Moskowitz, James Taurasi, Bob Tucker, Julius Unger, Raymond Van Houten, Allen Glasser...

David Kyle, E. E. Evans, James Taurasi, myself and 2 others were elected Directors of the World Science Fiction Society.

No account of the Newyorcon could be complete without a deep bow of appreciation to the altruistic trio of committeemen (including one comely woman) who all but destroyed themselves engineering the Convention: David A. Kyle, Ruth Landis and Dick Ellington.

By a vote of 3 to 1, London was selected as the site of the 15th Con, to be held in '57. For an unforgettable experience in the fantastic universe of science fiction enthusiasts, plan *now* to attend the LONCON!

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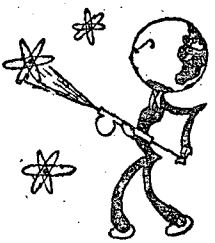

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the valor of cappen varra

by . . . *POUL ANDERSON*

"Let little Cappen go", they shouted. "Maybe he can sing the trolls to sleep —"

The wind came from the north with sleet on its back. Raw shuddering gusts whipped the sea till the ship lurched and men felt driven spindrift stinging their faces. Beyond the rail there was winter night, a moving blackness where the waves rushed and clamored; straining into the great dark, men sensed only the bitter salt of sea-scud, the nettle of sleet and the lash of wind.

Cappen lost his footing as the ship heaved beneath him, his hands were yanked from the icy rail and he went stumbling to the deck. The bilge water was new coldness on his drenched clothes. He struggled back to his feet, leaning on a rower's bench and wishing miserably that his quaking stomach had more to lose. But he had already chucked his share of stockfish and hardtack, to the laughter of Svearek's men, when the gale started.

Numb fingers groped anxiously for the harp on his back. It still seemed intact in its leather case. He didn't care about the sodden wadmal breeks and tunic that hung around his skin. The

We have said that there are many and strange shadows, memories surviving from dim pasts, in this FANTASTIC UNIVERSE of ours. Poul Anderson turns to a legend from the Northern countries, countries where even today the pagan past seems only like yesterday, and tells the story of Cappen Varra, who came to Norren a long, long time ago.

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sooner they rotted off him, the better. The thought of the silks and linens of Croy was a sigh in him.

Why had he come to Norren?

A gigantic form, vague in the whistling dark, loomed beside him and gave him a steadying hand. He could barely hear the blond giant's bull tones: "Ha, easy there, lad. Methinks the sea horse road is too rough for yer feet."

"Ulp," said Cappen. His slim body huddled on the bench, too miserable to care. The sleet pattered against his shoulders and the spray congealed in his red hair.

Torbek of Norren squinted into the night. It made his leathery face a mesh of wrinkles. "A bitter feast Yolner we hold," he said. "'Twas a madness of the king's, that he would guest with his brother across the water. Now the other ships are blown from us and the fire is drenched out and we lie alone in the Wolf's Throat."

Wind piped shrill in the rigging. Cappen could just see the longboat's single mast reeling against the sky. The ice on the shrouds made it a pale pyramid. Ice everywhere, thick on the rails and benches, sheathing the dragon head and the carved sternpost, the ship rolling and staggering under the great march of waves, men bailing and bailing in the half-frozen bilge to keep her afloat, and too much wind for sail or oars. Yes—a cold feast!

"But then, Svearek has been strange since the troll took his daughter, three years ago," went on Torbek. He shivered in a way the winter had not caused. "Never does he smile, and his once open hand grasps tight about the silver and his men have poor reward and no thanks. Yes, strange—" His small frost-blue eyes shifted to Cappen Varra, and the unspoken thought ran on beneath them: Strange, even, that he likes you, the wandering bard from the south. Strange, that he will have you in his hall when you cannot sing as his men would like.

Cappen did not care to defend himself. He had drifted up toward the northern barbarians with the idea that they would well reward a minstrel who could offer them something more than their own crude chants. It had been a mistake; they didn't care for roundels or sestinas, they yawned at the thought of roses white and red under the moon of Caronne, a moon less fair than my lady's eyes. Nor did a man of Croy have the size and strength to compel their respect; Cappen's light blade flickered swiftly enough so that no one cared to fight him, but he lacked the power

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of sheer bulk. Svearek alone had enjoyed hearing him sing, but he was niggardly and his brawling thorp was an endless boredom to a man used to the courts of southern princes.

If he had but had the manhood to leave— But he had delayed, because of a lusty peasant wench and a hope that Svearek's coffers would open wider; and now he was dragged along over the Wolf's Throat to a midwinter feast which would have to be celebrated on the sea.

"Had we but fire—" Torbek thrust his hands inside his cloak, trying to warm them a little. The ship rolled till she was almost on her beam ends; Torbek braced himself with practiced feet, but Cappen went into the bilge again.

He sprawled there for a while, his bruised body refusing movement. A weary sailor with a bucket glared at him through dripping hair. His shout was dim under the hoot and skirl of wind: "If ye like it so well down here, then help us bail!"

"'Tis not yet my turn," groaned Cappen, and got slowly up.

The wave which had nearly swamped them had put out the ship's fire and drenched the wood beyond hope of lighting a new one. It was cold fish and sea-sodden hardtack till they saw land again—if they ever did.

As Cappen raised himself on the leeward side, he thought he saw something gleam, far out across the wrathful night. A wavering red spark— He brushed a stiffened hand across his eyes, wondering if the madness of wind and water had struck through into his own skull. A gust of sleet hid it again. But—

He fumbled his way aft between the benches. Huddled figures cursed him wearily as he stepped on them. The ship shook herself, rolled along the edge of a boiling black trough, and slid down into it; for an instant, the white teeth of combers grinned above her rail, and Cappen waited for an end to all things. Then she mounted them again, somehow, and wallowed toward another valley.

King Svearek had the steering oar and was trying to hold the longboat into the wind. He had stood there since sundown, huge and untiring, legs braced and the bucking wood cradled in his arms. More than human he seemed, there under the icicle loom of the stern-post, his gray hair and beard rigid with ice. Beneath the horned helmet, the strong moody face turned right and left, peering into the darkness. Cappen felt smaller

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than usual when he approached the steersman.

He leaned close to the king, shouting against the blast of winter: "My lord, did I not see firelight?"

"Aye. I spied it an hour ago," grunted the king. "Been trying to steer us a little closer to it."

Cappen nodded, too sick and weary to feel reproved. "What is it?"

"Some island—there are many in this stretch of water—now shut up!"

Cappen crouched down under the rail and waited.

The lonely red gleam seemed nearer when he looked again. Svearek's tones were lifting in a roar that hammered through the gale from end to end of the ship: "Hither! Come hither to me, all men not working!"

Slowly, they groped to him, great shadowy forms in wool and leather, bulking over Cappen like storm-gods. Svearek nodded toward the flickering glow. "One of the islands, somebody must be living there. I cannot bring the ship closer for fear of surf, but one of ye should be able to take the boat thither and fetch us fire and dry wood. Who will go?"

They peered overside, and the uneasy movement that ran among them came from more than the roll and pitch of the deck underfoot.

Beorna the Bold spoke at last, it was hardly to be heard in the noisy dark: "I never knew of men living hereabouts. It must be a lair of trolls."

"Aye, so...aye, they'd but eat the man we sent...out oars, let's away from here though it cost our lives..." The frightened mumble was low under the jeering wind.

Svearek's face drew into a snarl. "Are ye men or puling babes? Hack yer way through them, if they be trolls, but bring me fire!"

"Even a she-troll is stronger than fifty men, my king," cried Torbek. "Well ye know that, when the monster woman broke through out guards three years ago and bore off Hildigund."

"Enough!" It was a scream in Svearek's throat. "I'll have yer craven heads for this, all of ye, if ye gang not to the isle!"

They looked at each other, the big men of Norren, and their shoulders hunched bear-like. It was Beorna who spoke it for them: "No, that ye will not. We are free housecarls, who will fight for a leader—but not for a madman."

Cappen drew back against the rail, trying to make himself small.

"All gods turn their faces from ye!" It was more than weariness and despair which glared in Svearek's eyes,

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there was something of death in them. "I'll go myself, then!"

"No, my king. That we will not find ourselves in."

"I am the king"

"And we are yer house-carls, sworn to defend ye—even from yerself. Ye shall not go."

The ship rolled again, so violently that they were all thrown to starboard. Cappen landed on Torbek, who reached up to shove him aside and then closed one huge fist on his tunic.

"Here's our man!"

"Hi!" yelled Cappen.

Torbek hauled him roughly back to his feet. "Ye cannot row or bail yer fair share," he growled, "nor do ye know the rigging or any skill of a sailor— 'tis time ye made yerself useful!"

"Aye, aye—let little Cappen go—mayhap he can sing the trolls to sleep—" The laughter was hard and barking, edged with fear, and they all hemmed him in.

"My lord!" bleated the minstrel. "I am your guest—"

Svearek laughed unpleasantly, half crazily. "Sing them a song," he howled. "Make a fine roun—whatever ye call it—to the troll-wife's beauty. And bring us some fire, little man, bring us a flame less hot than the love in yer breast for yer lady!"

Teeth grinned through matted beards. Someone hauled on the rope from which the ship's small boat trailed, dragging it close. "Go, ye scut!" A horny hand sent Cappen stumbling to the rail.

He cried out once again. An ax lifted above his head. Someone handed him his own slim sword, and for a wild moment he thought of fighting. Useless—too many of them. He buckled on the sword and spat at the men. The wind tossed it back in his face, and they raved with laughter.

Over the side! The boat rose to meet him, he landed in a heap on drenched planks and looked up into the shadowy faces of the northmen. There was a sob in his throat as he found the seat and took out the oars.

An awkward pull sent him spinning from the ship, and then the night had swallowed it and he was alone. Numbly, he bent to the task. Unless he wanted to drown, there was no place to go but the island.

He was too weary and ill to be much afraid, and such fear as he had was all of the sea. It could rise over him, gulp him down, the gray horses would gallop over him and the long weeds would wrap him when he rolled dead against some skerry. The soft vales of Caronne and the roses in Croy's gar-

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dens seemed like a dream. There was only the roar and boom of the northern sea, hiss of sleet and spindrift, crazed scream of wind, he was alone as man had ever been and he would go down to the sharks alone.

The boat wallowed, but rode the waves better than the longship. He grew dully aware that the storm was pushing him toward the island. It was becoming visible, a deeper blackness harsh against the night.

He could not row much in the restless water, he shipped the oars and waited for the gale to capsize him and fill his mouth with the sea. And when it gurgled in his throat, what would his last thought be? Should he dwell on the lovely image of Ydris in Seilles, she of the long bright hair and the singing voice? But then there had been the tomboy laughter of dark Falkny, he could not neglect her. And there were memories of Elvanna in her castle by the lake, and Sirann of the Hundred Rings, and beauteous Vardry, and hawk-proud Lona, and— No, he could not do justice to any of them in the little time that remained. What a pity it was!

No, wait, that unforgettable night in Nienne, the beauty which had whispered in his ear and drawn him close, the hair which had fallen like a silken tent about his cheeks...ah, that had been the summit of his life, he would go down into darkness with her name on his lips... But hell! What *had* her name been, now?

Cappen Vara, minstrel of Croy, clung to the bench and sighed.

The great hollow voice of surf lifted about him, waves sheeted across the gunwale and the boat danced in madness. Cappen groaned, huddling into the circle of his own arms and shaking with cold. Swiftly, now, the end of all sunlight and laughter, the dark and lonely road which all men must tread. *O Ilwarra of Syr, Aedra in Tholis, could I but kiss you once more—*

Stones grated under the keel. It was a shock like a sword going through him. Cappen looked unbelievingly up. The boat had drifted to land—he was alive!

It was like the sun in his breast. Weariness fell from him, and he leaped overside, not feeling the chill of the shallows. With a grunt, he heaved the boat up on the narrow strand and knotted the painter to a fang-like jut of reef.

Then he looked about him. The island was small, utterly bare, a savage loom of rock rising out of the sea that growled at its feet and streamed off its shoulders.

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He had come into a little cliff-walled bay, somewhat sheltered from the wind. He was here!

For a moment he stood, running through all he had learned about the trolls which infested these northlands. Hideous and soulless dwellers underground, they knew not old age; a sword could hew them asunder, but before it reached their deep-seated life, their unhuman strength had plucked a man apart. Then they ate him—

Small wonder the northmen feared them. Cappen threw back his head and laughed. He had once done a service for a mighty wizard in the south, and his reward hung about his neck, a small silver amulet. The wizard had told him that no supernatural being could harm anyone who carried a piece of silver.

The northmen said that a troll was powerless against a man who was not afraid; but, of course, only to see one was to feel the heart turn to ice. They did not know the value of silver, it seemed—odd that they shouldn't, but they did not. Because Cappen Varra did, he had no reason to be afraid; therefore he was doubly safe, and it was but a matter of talking the troll into giving him some fire. If indeed there was a troll here, and not some harmless fisherman.

He whistled gaily, wrung some of the water from his cloak and ruddy hair, and started along the beach. In the sleety gloom, he could just see a hewn-out path winding up one of the cliffs and he set his feet on it.

At the top of the path, the wind ripped his whistling from his lips. He hunched his back against it and walked faster, swearing as he stumbled on hidden rocks. The ice-sheathed ground was slippery underfoot, and the cold bit like a knife.

Rounding a crag, he saw redness glow in the face of a steep bluff. A cave mouth, a fire within—he hastened his steps, hungering for warmth, until he stood in the entrance.

"Who comes?"

It was a hoarse bass cry that rang and boomed between walls of rock; there was ice and horror in it, for a moment Cappen's heart stumbled. Then he remembered the amulet and strode boldly inside.

"Good evening, mother," he said cheerily.

The cave widened out into a stony hugeness that gaped with tunnels leading further underground. The rough, soot-blackened walls were hung with plundered silks and cloth-of-gold, gone ragged with age and damp; the floor was strewn with stinking rushes, and gnawed

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bones were heaped in disorder. Cappen saw the skulls of men among them. In the center of the room, a great fire leaped and blazed, throwing billows of heat against him; some of its smoke went up a hole in the roof, the rest stung his eyes to watering and he sneezed.

The troll-wife crouched on the floor, snarling at him. She was quite the most hideous thing Cappen had ever seen: nearly as tall as he, she was twice as broad and thick, and the knotted arms hung down past bowed knees till their clawed fingers brushed the ground. Her head was beast-like, almost split in half by the tusked mouth, the eyes wells of darkness, the nose an ell long; her hairless skin was green and cold, moving on her bones. A tattered shift covered some of her monstrousness, but she was still a nightmare.

"Ho-ho, ho-ho!" Her laughter roared out, hungry and hollow as the surf around the island. Slowly, she shuffled closer. "So my dinner comes walking in to greet me, ho, ho, ho! Welcome, sweet flesh, welcome, good marrow-filled bones, come in and be warmed."

"Why, thank you, good mother." Cappen shucked his cloak and grinning at her through the smoke. He felt his clothes steaming already. "I love you too."

Over her shoulder, he suddenly saw the girl. She was huddled in a corner, wrapped in fear, but the eyes that watched him were as blue as the skies over Caronne. The ragged dress did not hide the gentle curves of her body, nor did the tear-streaked grime spoil the lilt of her face. "Why, 'tis springtime in here," cried Cappen, "and Primavera herself is strewing flowers of love."

"What are you talking about, crazy man?" rumbled the troll-wife. She turned to the girl. "Heap the fire Hildigund, and set up the roasting spit. Tonight I feast!"

"Truly I see heaven in female form before me," said Cappen.

The troll scratched her misshapen head.

"You must surely be from far away, moonstruck man," she said.

"Aye, from golden Croy am I wandered, drawn over dolorous seas and empty wild lands by the fame of loveliness waiting here; and now that I have seen you, my life is full." Cappen was looking at the girl as he spoke, but he hoped the troll might take it as aimed her way.

"It will be fuller," grinned the monster. "Stuffed with hot coals while yet you live." She glanced back at the girl.

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"What, are you not working yet, you lazy tub of lard? Set up the spit, I said!"

The girl shuddered back against a heap of wood. "No," she whispered. "I cannot—not...not for a man."

"Can and will, my girl," said the troll, picking up a bone to throw at her. The girl shrieked a little.

"No, no, sweet mother. I would not be so ungallant as to have beauty toil for me." Cappen plucked at the troll's filthy dress. "It is not meet—in two senses. I only came to beg a little fire; yet will I bear away a greater fire within my heart."

"Fire in your guts, you mean! No man ever left me save as picked bones."

Cappen thought he heard a worried note in the animal growl. "Shall we have music for the feast?" he asked mildly. He unslung the case of his harp and took it out.

The troll-wife waved her fists in the air and danced with rage. "Are you mad? I tell you, you are going to be eaten!"

The minstrel plucked a string on his harp. "This wet air has played the devil with her tone," he murmured sadly.

The troll-wife roared wordlessly and lunged at him. Hildigund covered her eyes. Cappen tuned his harp. A foot from his throat, the claws stopped.

"Pray do not excite yourself, mother," said the bard. "I carry silver, you know."

"What is that to me? If you think you have a charm which will turn me, know that there is none. I've no fear of your metal!"

Cappen threw back his head and sang:

"A lovely lady full oft lies.
The light that lies within her eyes
and lies and lies, in no surprise.
All her unkindness can devise
to trouble hearts that seek the prize
which is herself, are angel lies—"

"Aaaarrrgh!" It was like thunder drowning him out. The troll-wife turned and went on all fores and poked up the fire with her nose.

Cappen stepped softly around her and touched the girl. She looked up with a little whimper.

"You are Svearek's only daughter, are you not?" he whispered.

"Aye—" She bowed her head, a strengthless despair weighting it down. "The troll stole me away three winters agone. It has tickled her to have a princess for slave—but soon I will roast on her spit, even as ye, brave man—"

"Ridiculous. So fair a lady is meant for another kind of, um, never mind! Has she

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treated you very ill?"

She beats me now and again—and I have been so lonely, naught here at all save the troll-wife and I—" The small work-roughened hands clutched desperately at his waist, and she buried her face against his breast.

"Can ye save us?" she gasped. "I fear 'tis for naught ye ventured yer life, bravest of men. I fear we'll soon both sputter on the coals."

Cappen said nothing. If she wanted to think he had come especially to rescue her, he would not be so ungallant to tell her otherwise.

The troll-wife's mouth gashed in a grin as she walked through the fire to him. "There is a price," she said. "If you cannot tell me three things about myself which are true beyond disproving, not courage nor amulet nor the gods themselves may avail to keep that red head on your shoulders."

Cappen clapped a hand to his sword. "Why, gladly," he said; this was a rule of magic he had learned long ago, that three truths were the needful armor to make any guardian charm work. "Imprimis, yours is the ugliest nose I ever saw poking up a fire. Secundus, I was never in a house I cared less to guest at. Tertius, ever among trolls you are little liked, being one of the worst."

Hildigund moaned with terror as the monster swelled in rage. But there was no movement. Only the leaping flames and the eddying smoke stirred.

Cappen's voice rang out, coldly: "Now the king lies on the sea, frozen and wet, and I am come to fetch a brand for his fire. And I had best also see his daughter home."

The troll shook her head, suddenly chuckling. "No. The brand you may have, just to get you out of this cave, foulness; but the woman is in my thrall until a man sleeps with her—here—for a night. And if he does, I may have him to break my fast in the morning!"

Cappen yawned mightily. "Thank you, mother. Your offer of a bed is most welcome to these tired bones, and I accept gratefully."

"You will die tomorrow!" she raved. The ground shook under the huge weight of her as she stamped. "Because of the three truths, I must let you go tonight; but tomorrow I may do what I will!"

"Forget not my little friend, mother," said Cappen, and touched the cord of the amulet.

"I tell you, silver has no use against me—"

Cappen sprawled on the floor and rippled fingers across his harp. "*A lovely lady full oft lies—*"

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The troll-wife turned from him in a rage. Hildigund ladled up some broth, saying nothing, and Cappen ate it with pleasure, though it could have used more seasoning.

After that he indited a sonnet to the princess, who regarded him wide-eyed. The troll came back from a tunnel after he finished, and said curtly: "This way." Cappen took the girl's hand and followed her into a pitchy, reeking dark.

She plucked an arras aside to show a room which surprised him by being hung with tapestries, lit with candles, and furnished with a fine broad featherbed. "Sleep here tonight, if you dare," she growled. "And tomorrow I shall eat you—and you, worthless lazy she-trash, will have the hide flayed off your back!" She barked a laugh and left them.

Hildigund fell weeping on the mattress. Cappen let her cry herself out while he undressed and got between the blankets. Drawing his sword, he laid it carefully in the middle of the bed.

The girl looked at him through jumbled fair locks. "How can ye dare?" she whispered. "One breath of fear, one moment's doubt, and the troll is free to rend ye."

"Exactly." Cappen yawned. "Doubtless she hopes that fear will come to me lying wakeful in the night. Wherefore 'tis but a question of going gently to sleep. O Svearek, Torbek, and Beorna, could you but see how I am resting now!"

"But...the three truths ye gave her...how knew ye...?"

"Oh, those. Well, see you, sweet lady, Primus and Secundus were my own thoughts, and who is to disprove them? Tertius was also clear, since you said there had been no company here in three years—yet are there many trolls in these lands, ergo even they cannot stomach our gentle hostess." Cappen watched her through heavy-lidded eyes.

She flushed deeply, blew out the candles, and he heard her slip off her garment and get in with him. There was a long silence.

Then: "Are ye not—"

"Yes, fair one?" he muttered through his drowsiness.

"Are ye not...well, I am here and ye are here and—"

"Fear not," he said. "I laid my sword between us. Sleep in peace."

"I...would be glad—ye have come to deliver—"

"No, fair lady. No man of gentle breeding could so abuse his power. Goodnight." He leaned over, brushing his lips gently across hers, and lay down again.

"Ye are...I never thought man could be so noble," she whispered.

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Cappen mumbled something. As his soul spun into sleep, he chuckled. Those unresting days and nights on the sea had not left him fit for that kind of exercise. But, of course, if she wanted to think he was being magnanimous, it could be useful later—

He woke with a start and looked into the sputtering glare of a torch. Its light wove across the crags and gullies of the troll-wife's face and shimmered wetly off the great tusks in her mouth.

"Good morning, mother," said Cappen politely.

Hildigund thrust back a scream.

"Come and be eaten," said the troll-wife.

"No, thank you," said Cappen, regretfully but firmly. "'Twould be ill for my health. No, I will but trouble you for a firebrand and then the princess and I will be off."

"If you think that stupid bit of silver will protect you, think again," she snapped. "Your three sentences were all that saved you last night. Now I hunger."

"Silver," said Cappen didactically, "is a certain shield against all black magics. So the wizard told me, and he was such a nice white-bearded old man I am sure even his attendant devils never lied. Now please depart, mother, for modesty forbids me to dress before your eyes."

The hideous face thrust close to his. He smiled dreamily and tweaked her nose—hard.

She howled and flung the torch at him. Cappen caught it and stuffed it into her mouth. She choked and ran from the room.

"A new sport—trollbaiting," said the bard gaily into the sudden darkness. "Come, shall we not venture out?"

The girl trembled too much to move. He comforted her, absentmindedly, and dressed in the dark, swearing at the clumsy leggings. When he left, Hildigund put on her clothes and hurried after him.

The troll-wife squatted by the fire and glared at them as they went by. Cappen hefted his sword and looked at her. "I do not love you," he said mildly, and hewed out.

She backed away, shrieking as he slashed at her. In the end, she crouched at the mouth of a tunnel, raging futilely. Cappen pricked her with his blade.

"It is not worth my time to follow you down underground," he said, "but if ever you trouble men again, I will hear of it and come and feed you to my dogs. A piece at a time—a very small piece—do you understand?"

She snarled at him.

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"An *extremely* small piece," said Cappen amiably. "Have you heard me?"

Something broke in her. "Yes," she whimpered. He let her go, and she scuttled from him like a rat.

He remembered the firewood and took an armful; on the way, he thoughtfully picked up a few jeweled rings which he didn't think she would be needing and stuck them in his pouch. Then he led the girl outside.

The wind had laid itself, a clear frosty morning glittered on the sea and the longship was a distant sliver against white-capped blueness. The minstrel groaned. "What a distance to row! Oh, well—"

They were at sea before Hildigund spoke. Awe was in the eyes that watched him. "No man could be so brave," she murmured. "Are ye a god?"

"Not quite," said Cappen. "No, most beautiful one, modesty grips my tongue. 'Twas but that I had the silver and was therefore proof against her sorcery."

"But the silver was no help!" she cried.

Cappen's oar caught a crab. "What?" he yelled.

"No—no—why, she told ye so her own self—"

"I thought she lied. I *know* the silver guards against—"

"But she used no magic! Trolls have but their own strength!"

Cappen sagged in his seat. For a moment he thought he was going to faint. Then only his lack of fear had armored him; and if he had known the truth, that would not have lasted a minute.

He laughed shakily. Another score for his doubts about the overall value of truth!

The longship's oars bit water and approached him. Indignant voices asking why he had been so long on his errand faded when his passenger was seen. And Svearek the king wept as he took his daughter back into his arms.

The hard brown face was still blurred with tears when he looked at the minstrel, but the return of his old self was there too. "What ye have done, Cappen Varra of Croy, is what no other man in the world could have done."

"Aye—aye—" The rough northern voices held adoration as the warriors crowded around the slim red-haired figure.

"Ye shall have her whom ye saved to wife," said Svearek, "and when I die ye shall rule all Norren."

Cappen swayed and clutched the rail.

Three nights later he slipped away from their shore camp and turned his face southward.

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dream town

by . . . HENRY SLESAR

The woman in the doorway looked so harmless. Who was to tell she had some rather startling interests?

THE WOMAN in the doorway looked like Mom in the homier political cartoons. She was plump, apple-cheeked, white-haired. She wore a fussy, old-fashioned nightgown, and was busily clutching a worn housecoat around her expansive middle. She blinked at Sol Becker's rain-flattened hair and hang-dog expression, and said: "What is it? What do you want?"

"I'm sorry—" Sol's voice was pained. "The man in the diner said you might put me up. I had my car stolen: a hitchhiker; going to Salinas..." He was puffing.

"Hitchhiker? I don't understand." She clucked at the sight of the pool of water he was creating in her foyer. "Well, come inside. for heaven's sake. You're soaking!"

"Thanks," Sol said gratefully.

With the door firmly shut behind him, the warm interior of the little house covered him like a blanket. He shivered, and let the warmth seep over him. "I'm terribly sorry. I know how late it is" He looked at his watch, but the face was too misty to

Henry Slesar, young New York advertising executive and by now no longer a new-comer to either this magazine or to this field, describes a strange little town that you, yourself, may blunder into one of these evenings. But, if you do, beware—beware of the Knights!

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make out the hour.

"Must be nearly three," the woman sniffed. "You couldn't have come at a worse time. I was just on my way to court—"

The words slid by him. "If I could just stay overnight. Until the morning. I could call some friends in San Fernando. I'm very susceptible to head colds," he added inanely.

"Well, take those shoes off, first," the woman grumbled. "You can undress in the parlor, if you'll keep off the rug. You won't mind using the sofa?"

"No, of course not. I'd be happy to pay—"

"Oh, tush, nobody's asking you to pay. This isn't a hotel. You mind if I go back upstairs? They're gonna miss me at the palace."

"No, of course not," Sol said. He followed her into the darkened parlor, and watched as she turned the screw on a hurricane-style lamp, shedding a yellow pool of light over half a flowery sofa and a doily-covered wing chair. "You go on up. I'll be perfectly fine."

"Guess you can use a towel, though. I'll get you one, then I'm going up. We wake pretty early in this house. Breakfast's at seven; you'll have to be up if you want any."

"I really can't thank you enough—"

"Tush," the woman said. She scurried out, and returned a moment later with a thick bath towel. "Sorry I can't give you any bedding. But you'll find it nice and warm in here." She squinted at the dim face of a ship's-wheel clock on the mantle, and made a noise with her tongue. "Three-thirty!" she exclaimed. "I'll miss the whole execution..."

"The what?"

"Goodnight, young man," Mom said firmly.

She padded off, leaving Sol holding the towel. He patted his face, and then scrubbed the wet tangle of brown hair. Carefully, he stepped off the carpet and onto the stone floor in front of the fireplace. He removed his drenched coat and suit jacket, and squeezed water out over the ashes.

He stripped down to his underwear, wondering about next morning's possible embarrassment, and decided to use the damp bath towel as a blanket. The sofa was downy and comfortable. He curled up under the towel, shivered once, and closed his eyes.

HE WAS TIRED and very sleepy, and his customary nightly review was limited to a few detached thoughts about the wedding he was supposed to attend in Salinas that weekend...the hoodlum who had responded to his good-nature by dumping him out of his own car...the slogging walk to the village... the little round woman who

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was hurrying off, like the White Rabbit, to some mysterious appointment on the upper floor...

Then he went to sleep.

A voice awoke him, shrill and questioning.

"Are you *nakkid?*"

His eyes flew open, and he pulled the towel protectively around his body and glared at the little girl with the rust-red pigtails.

"Huh, mister?" she said, pushing a finger against her freckled nose. "Are you?"

"No," he said angrily. "I'm not naked. Will you please go away?"

"Sally!" It was Mom, appearing in the doorway of the parlor. "You leave the gentleman alone." She went off again.

"Yes," Sol said. "Please let me get dressed. If you don't mind." The girl didn't move. "What time is it?"

"Dunno," Sally shrugged. "I like poached eggs. They're my favorite eggs in the whole world."

"That's good," Sol said desperately. "Now why don't you be a good girl and eat your poached eggs. In the kitchen."

"Ain't ready yet. You going to stay for breakfast?"

"I'm not going to do anything until you get out of here."

She put the end of a pigtail in her mouth and sat down on the chair opposite. "I went to the palace last night. They had an exelution."

"Please," Sol groaned. "Be a good girl, Sally. If you let me get dressed, I'll show you how to take your thumb off."

"Oh, that's an old trick. Did you ever see an exelution?"

"No. Did you ever see a little girl with her hide tanned?"

"Huh?"

"*Sally!*" Mom again, sterner. "You get out of there, or you-know-what..."

"Okay," the girl said blithely. "I'm goin' to the palace again. If I brush my teeth. Aren't you *ever* gonna get up?" She skipped out of the room, and Sol hastily sat up and reached for his trousers.

When he had dressed, the clothes still damp and unpleasant against his skin, he went out of the parlor and found the kitchen. Mom was busy at the stove. He said: "Good morning."

"Breakfast in ten minutes," she said cheerfully. "You like poached eggs?"

"Sure. Do you have a telephone?"

"In the hallway. Party line, so you may have to wait."

He tried for fifteen minutes to get through, but there was a woman on the line who was terribly upset about a cotton dress she had ordered from Sears, and was telling the world about it.

Finally, he got his call through to Salinas, and a sleepy-voiced Fred, his old Army buddy, listened somewhat indifferently to his tale

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of woe. "I might miss the wedding," Sol said unhappily. "I'm awfully sorry." Fred didn't seem to be half as sorry as he was. When Sol hung up, he was feeling more despondent than ever.

A man, tall and rangy, with a bobbing Adam's apple and a lined face, came into the hallway. "Hullo?" he said inquiringly. "You the fella had the car stolen?"

"Yes."

The man scratched his ear. "Take you over to Sheriff Coogan after breakfast. He'll let the Stateys know about it. My name's Dawes."

Sol accepted a careful handshake.

"Don't get many people comin' into town," Dawes said, looking at him curiously. "Ain't seen a stranger in years. But you look like the rest of us." He chuckled.

Mom called out: "Breakfast!"

AT THE TABLE, Dawes asked his destination.

"Wedding in Salinas," he explained. "Old Army friend of mine. I picked this hitchhiker up about two miles from here. He *seemed* okay."

"Never can tell," Dawes said placidly, munching egg. "Hey, Ma. That why you were so late comin' to court last night?"

"That's right, Pa." She poured the blackest coffee Sol had ever seen. "Didn't miss much, though."

"What court is that?" Sol asked politely, his mouth full.

"Umagum," Sally said, a piece of toast sticking out from the side of her mouth. "Don't you know *nothin'*?"

"*Arm*agon," Dawes corrected. He looked sheepishly at the stranger. "Don't expect Mister—" He cocked an eyebrow. "What's the name?"

"Becker."

"Don't expect Mr. Becker knows anything about Armagon. It's just a dream, you know." He smiled apologetically.

"Dream? You mean this—Armagon is a place you dream about?"

"Yep," Dawes said. He lifted cup to lip. "Great coffee, Ma." He leaned back with a contented sigh. "Dream about it every night. Got so used to the place, I get all confused in the daytime."

Mom said: "I get muddle-headed too, sometimes."

"You mean—" Sol put his napkin in his lap. "You mean *you* dream about the same place?"

"Sure," Sally piped. "We all go there at night. I'm goin' to the palace again, too."

"If you brush your teeth," Mom said primly.

"If I brush my teeth. Boy, you shoulda seen the exelution!"

"Execution," her father said.

"Oh, my goodness!" Mom got up hastily. "That reminds me. I gotta call poor Mrs. Brundage. It's the *least* I could do."

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"Good idea," Dawes nodded. "And I'll have to round up some folks and get old Brundage out of there."

Sol was staring. He opened his mouth, but couldn't think of the right question to ask. Then he blurted out: "What execution?"

"None of *your* business," the man said coldly. "You eat up, young man. If you want me to get Sheriff Coogan lookin' for your car."

The rest of the meal went silently, except for Sally's insistence upon singing her school song between mouthfuls. When Dawes was through, he pushed back his plate and ordered Sol to get ready.

Sol grabbed his topcoat and followed the man out the door.

"Have to stop someplace first," Dawes said. "But we'll be pickin' up the Sheriff on the way. Okay with you?"

"Fine," Sol said uneasily.

The rain had stopped, but the heavy clouds seemed reluctant to leave the skies over the small town. There was a skittish breeze blowing, and Sol Becker tightened the collar of his coat around his neck as he tried to keep up with the fast-stepping Dawes.

THEY CROSSED the street diagonally, and entered a two-story wooden building. Dawes took the stairs at a brisk pace, and pushed open the door on the second floor. A fat man looked up from behind a desk.

"Hi, Charlie. Thought I'd see if you wanted to help move Brundage."

The man batted his eyes. "Oh, Brundage!" he said. "You know, I clean forgot about him?" He laughed. "Imagine me forgetting that?"

"Yeah." Dawes wasn't amused. "And you Prince Regent."

"Aw, Willie—"

"Well, come on. Stir that fat carcass. Gotta pick up Sheriff Coogan, too. This here gentleman has to see him about somethin' else."

The man regarded Sol suspiciously. "Never seen you before. Night *or* day. Stranger?"

"Come *on!*" Dawes said.

The fat man grunted and hoisted himself out of the swivel chair. He followed lamely behind the two men as they went out into the street again.

A woman, with an empty market basket, nodded casually to them. "Mornin', folks. Enjoyed it last night. Thought you made a right nice speech, Mr. Dawes."

"Thanks," Dawes answered gruffly, but obviously flattered. "We were just goin' over to Brundage's to pick up the body. Ma's gonna pay a call on Mrs. Brundage around ten o'clock. You care to visit?"

"Why, I think that's very nice," the woman said. "I'll

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be sure and do that." She smiled at the fat man. "Mornin', Prince."

Sol's head was spinning. As they left the woman and continued their determined march down the quiet street, he tried to find answers.

"Look, Mr. Dawes." He was panting; the pace was fast. "Does *she* dream about this—Armagon, too? That woman back there?"

"Yep."

Charlie chuckled. "He's a stranger, all right."

"And you, Mr.—" Sol turned to the fat man. "You also know about this palace and everything?"

"I told you," Dawes said testily. "Charlie here's Prince Regent. But don't let the fancy title fool you. He got no more power than any Knight of the Realm. He's just too dern fat to do much more'n sit on a throne and eat grapes. That right, Charlie?"

The fat man gigged.

"Here's the Sheriff," Dawes said.

The Sheriff, a sleepy-eyed citizen with a long, sad face, was rocking on a porch as they approached his house, trying to puff a half-lit pipe. He lifted one hand wearily when he saw them.

"Hi, Cookie," Dawes grinned. "Thought you, me, and Charlie would get Brundage's body outa the house. This here's Mr. Becker; he got another problem. Mr. Becker, meet Cookie Coogan."

The Sheriff joined the procession, pausing only once to inquire into Sol's predicament.

He described the hitchhiker incident, but Coogan listened stoically. He murmured something about the Troopers, and shuffled alongside the puffing fat man.

Sol soon realized that their destination was a barber shop.

Dawes cupped his hands over the plate glass and peered inside. Gold letters on the glass advertised: HAIRCUT SHAVE & MASSAGE PARLOR. He reported: "Nobody in the shop. Must be upstairs."

THE FAT MAN rang the bell. It was a while before an answer came.

It was a reedy woman in a housecoat, her hair in curlers, her eyes red and swollen.

"Now, now," Dawes said gently. "Don't you take on like that, Mrs. Brundage. You heard the charges. It hadda be this way."

"My poor Vincent," she sobbed.

"Better let us up," the Sheriff said kindly. "No use just lettin' him lay there, Mrs. Brundage."

"He didn't mean no harm," the woman snuffled. "He was just purely ornery, Vincent was. Just plain mean stubborn."

"The law's the law," the fat man sighed.

Sol couldn't hold himself in.

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"What law? Who's dead? How did it happen?"

Dawes looked at him disgustedly. "Now is it any of *your* business? I mean, is it?"

"I don't know," Sol said miserably.

"You better stay out of this," the Sheriff warned. "This is a local matter, young man. You better stay in the shop while we go up."

They filed past him and the crying Mrs. Brundage.

When they were out of sight, Sol pleaded with her. "What happened? How did your husband die?"

"Please..."

"You must tell me! Was it something to do with Armagon? Do you dream about the place, too?"

She was shocked at the question. "Of course!"

"And your husband? Did he have the same dream?"

Fresh tears resulted. "Can't you leave me alone?" She turned her back. "I got things to do. You can make yourself comfortable—" She indicated the barber chairs, and left through the back door.

Sol looked after her, and then ambled over to the first chair and slipped into the high seat. His reflection in the mirror, strangely gray in the dim light, made him groan. His clothes were a mess, and he needed a shave. If only Brundage had been alive...

He leaped out of the chair as voices sounded behind the door. Dawes was kicking it open with his foot, his arms laden with two rather large feet, still encased in bedroom slippers. Charlie was at the other end of the burden, which appeared to be a middle-aged man in pajamas. The Sheriff followed the trio up with a sad, undertaker expression. Behind him came Mrs. Brundage, properly weeping.

"We'll take him to the funeral parlor," Dawes said, breathing hard. "Weighs a ton, don't he?"

"What killed him?" Sol said.

"Heart attack."

The fat man chuckled.

The tableau was grisly. Sol looked away, towards the comfortingly mundane atmosphere of the barber shop. But even the sight of the thick-padded chairs, the shaving mugs on the wall, the neat rows of cutting instruments, seemed grotesque and morbid.

"Listen," Sol said, as they went through the doorway. "About my car—"

The Sheriff turned and regarded him lugubriously. "Your *car?* Young man, ain't you got no *respect?*"

Sol swallowed hard and fell silent. He went outside with them, the woman slamming the barber-shop door behind him. He waited in front of the building while the men toted away the corpse to some new destination.

HE TOOK a walk.

The town was just coming to life. People were strolling

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out of their houses, commenting on the weather, chuckling amiably about local affairs. Kids on bicycles were beginning to appear, jangling the little bells and hooting to each other. A woman, hanging wash in the back yard, called out to him, thinking he was somebody else.

He found a little park, no more than twenty yards in circumference, centered around a weatherbeaten monument of some unrecognizable military figure. Three old men took their places on the bench that circled the General, and leaned on their canes.

Sol was a civil engineer. But he made like a reporter.

"Pardon me, sir." The old man, leathery-faced, with a fine yellow moustache, looked at him dumbly. "Have you ever heard of Armagon?"

"You a stranger?"

"Yes."

"Thought so."

Sol repeated the question.

"Course I did. Been goin' there ever since I was a kid. Night-times, that is."

"How—I mean, what kind of place is it?"

"Said you're a stranger?"

"Yes."

"Then t'ain't your business."

That was that.

He left the park, and wandered into a thriving luncheonette. He tried questioning the man behind the counter, who merely snickered and said: "You stayin' with the Dawes, ain't you? Better ask Willie, then. He knows the place better than anybody."

He asked about the execution, and the man stiffened.

"Don't think I can talk about that. Fella broke one of the Laws; that's about it. Don't see where you come into it."

At eleven o'clock, he returned to the Dawes residence, and found Mom in the kitchen, surrounded by the warm nostalgic odor of home-baked bread. She told him that her husband had left a message for the stranger, informing him that the State Police would be around to get his story.

He waited in the house, gloomily turning the pages of the local newspaper, searching for references to Armagon. He found nothing.

At eleven-thirty, a brown-faced State Trooper came to call, and Sol told his story. He was promised nothing, and told to stay in town until he was contacted again by the authorities.

Mom fixed him a light lunch, the greatest feature of which was some hot bisquits she plucked out of the oven. It made him feel almost normal.

He wandered around the town some more after lunch, trying to spark conversation with the residents.

He learned little.

At five-thirty, he returned to the Dawes house, and was

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promptly leaped upon by little Sally.

"Hi! Hi! Hi!" she said, clutching his right leg and almost toppling him over. "We had a party in school. I had chocolate cake. You goin' to stay with us?"

"Just another night," Sol told her, trying to shake the girl off. "If it's okay with your folks. They haven't found my car yet."

"Sally!" Mom was peering out of the screen door. "You let Mr. Becker alone and go wash. Your Pa will be home soon."

"Oh, pooh," the girl said, her pigtails swinging. "Do you got a girlfriend, mister."

"No." Sol struggled towards the house with her dead weight on his leg. "Would you mind? I can't walk."

"Would you be my boyfriend?"

"Well, we'll talk about it. If you let go my leg."

Inside the house, she said: "We're having pot roast. You stayin'?"

"Of course Mr. Becker's stayin'," Mom said. "He's our guest."

"That's very kind of you," Sol said. "I really wish you'd let me pay something—"

"Don't want to hear another word about pay."

Mr. Dawes came home an hour later, looking tired. Mom pecked him lightly on the forehead. He glanced at the evening paper, and then spoke to Sol.

"Hear you been asking questions, Mr. Becker."

Sol nodded, embarrassed. "Guess I have. I'm awfully curious about this Armagon place. Never heard of anything like it before."

Dawes grunted. "You ain't a reporter?"

"Oh, no. I'm an engineer. I was just satisfying my own curiosity."

"Uh-huh." Dawes looked reflective. "You wouldn't be thinkin' about writing us up or anything. I mean, this is a pretty private affair."

"Writing it up?" Sol blinked. "I hadn't thought of it. But you'll have to admit—it's sure interesting."

"Yeah," Dawes said narrowly. "I guess it would be."

"Supper!" Mom called.

After the meal, they spent a quiet evening at home. Sally went to bed, screaming her reluctance, at eight-thirty. Mom, dozing in the big chair near the fireplace, padded upstairs at nine. Then Dawes yawned widely, stood up, and said goodnight at quarter-often.

He paused in the doorway before leaving.

"I'd think about that," he said. "Writing it up, I mean. A lot of folks would think you were just plum crazy."

Sol laughed feebly. "I guess they would at that."

"Goodnight," Dawes said.

"Goodnight."

He read Sally's copy of Treasure Island for about

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half an hour. Then he undressed, made himself comfortable on the sofa, snuggled under the soft blanket that Mom had provided, and shut his eyes.

He reviewed the events of the day before dropping off to sleep. The troublesome Sally. The strange dream world of Armagon. The visit to the barber shop. The removal of Brundage's body. The conversations with the townspeople. Dawes' suspicious attitude...

Then sleep came.

He was flanked by marble pillars, thrusting towards a high-domed ceiling.

The room stretched long and wide before him, the walls bedecked in stunning purple draperies.

He whirled at the sound of footsteps, echoing stridently on the stone floor. Someone was running towards him.

It was Sally, pigtails streaming out behind her, the small body wearing a flowing white toga. She was shrieking, laughing as she skittered past him, clutching a gleaming gold helmet.

He called out to her, but she was too busy outdistancing her pursuer. It was Sheriff Coogan, puffing and huffing, the metal-and-gold cloth uniform ludicrous on his lanky frame.

"Consarn kid!" he wheezed. "Gimme my hat!"

Mom was following him, her stout body regal in scarlet robes. "Sally! You give Sir Coogan his helmet! You hear?"

"Mrs. Dawes!" Sol said.

"Why, Mr. Becker! How nice to see you again! Pa! *Pa!* Look who's here!"

Willie Dawes appeared. *No!* Sol thought. This was *King* Dawes; nothing else could explain the magnificence of his attire.

"Yes," Dawes said craftily. "So I see. Welcome to Armagon, Mr. Becker."

"Armagon?" Sol gaped. "Then this is the place you've been dreaming about?"

"Yep," the King said. "And now *you're* in it, too."

"Then I'm only dreaming!"

Charlie, the fat man, clumsy as ever in his robes of State, said: "So *that's* the snooper, eh?"

"Yep," Dawes chuckled. "Think you better round up the Knights."

Sol said: "The Knights?"

"Exelution! Exelution!" Sally shrieked.

"Now wait a minute—"

Charlie shouted.

Running feet, clanking of armor. Sol backed up against a pillar. "Now look here. You've gone far enough—"

"Not quite," said the King.

The Knights stepped forward.

"Wait!" Sol screamed.

Familiar faces, under shining helmets, moved towards him; the tips of sharp-pointed spears gleaming wickedly. And Sol Becker wondered—would he ever awake?

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